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THE ART OF IMPROVISATION IN THE GREEK MUSICAL HERITAGE

Abstract

This chapter studies the different improvisational genres in the Hellenic musical heritage. Based on post-byzantine musical manuscripts, the discography of 78 rpm, contemporary sources and the musical experience of the author, it examines the types of improvisation in the Greek musical tradition, both as an autonomous form and as a part incorporated in a song or instrumental piece. By exploring the rules which set the limits within which the musician moves, the author presents a classification and analyses the structures, the morphologies, the instruments, the origins and the practices of different genres: table songs, *amanes*, intoned recitation, *moiroloi*, *skaros*, *taqsimi* and rhythmical improvisation.

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Foreword

One of the main morphological elements of the Hellenic musical heritage is the phenomenon of improvisation. It is the climax of challenge for a musician that gives him the opportunity to highlight his art and talent, to unfold his imagination and technique and to express himself outside the boundaries of a certain song or an instrumental piece. This is his ultimate personal moment in the musical praxis. No doubt, improvisation is the first stage of any kind of creativity. However, when it is incarnated in a piece of art and becomes specific, then it is no longer a process of improvisation but it is shaped to an "artwork", regardless of whether it obeys the rules of some kind of form or not.

For those readers who are not familiar with the Hellenic musical heritage, it is necessary to preface here some clarifications that will let them understand what follows. First of all, when we speak about the "Hellenic musical heritage" we mean any kind of music stuff, in any form or style, from antiquity to the present day: theoretical writings (or essays), notation, instrumentarium, morphology, personalities and themes; everything that reveals a remarkable continuation over time.² Should be stressed that Hellenic music is a modal musical system. It includes three dominant classifications: the "Ancient-Byzantine-Modern", the "Ecclesiastical-Secular" and the "scholarly and popular traditions", which boundaries are not always clear but often overlapping.

During the historical time the geographical boundaries expand and recede; that's why an intertemporal examination of the process of improvisation should take into account the wider possible geographical-historical boundaries. Therefore, in this article we refer not only to geographic regions within the modern Hellenic state, but also in others that used to be homes of compact native Hellenic populations for thousands of years. This clarification is necessary to understand the unique "Hellenic music geography" which displays extremely high diversity of local musical idioms (repertoire, instrumentarium, rhythmology), that seem to be disproportionately large to the geographic extent of Hellenism.

The truth is that the phenomenon of improvisation art in Hellenic music heritage is an unexplored scientific field. We have no relative studies, except two or three very small and introductory articles. The written sources are limited to a couple of literary references, scattered in time. The main material that let us to derive some initial observations and conclusions is the discography of 78 rpm, together with the existing archival and commercial recordings and the experience of the writer who has been an active musician over the last twenty-five years. These data witness for the originality of the subject, but also for the need of more

² See more in Samuel BAUD-BOVY, *Essai sur la chanson populaire grecque*, Nauplie, Fondation Ethnographique du Péloponnèse, 1983.

studies to follow, that will present the phenomenon of improvisation in the Hellenic musical heritage in more details and aspects.

Our information about the existence of improvisation in ancient Hellas and Byzantium is scarce. It is known that any creative inspiration was aiming primarily or exclusively to the synthesis of a specific project. In Byzantine ecclesiastical music indeed, that holds a written tradition since the 10th century, the compositional practice was inherent with the recording.³ Any exceptions to this rule will be examined, where needed, below.

Improvisation as a phenomenon occurs in all three inherent manifestations of traditional creation, poetry, dance and music, with an uneven geographical distribution. Especially in music, in some regions such as Epirus or Asia Minor the improvisation is widely spread, while in other places such as the Dodecanese islands it is absolutely absent in the musical expression while it appears very often in poems.

The basic conditions for achieving the art of improvisation is the knowledge of the tradition in which it occurs and the creative imagination of the composer. It needs an ideal combination of knowledge, experience and inspiration that during the passage of time is developing different versions of improvisation, in other words, some improvisational genres. The musician unfolds his creative inspiration within the limits of these improvisational forms. As characteristically mentioned by a traditional musician from Epirus “when I play a *skaros* or a *moiroloi* in clarinet, I am free to do anything, except ... of those which are prohibited!”⁴

As noted by L. Liavas, improvisation

promotes the harmonious coexistence of individual and communal, and the acceptance that your own freedom can not violate the rules adopted and experientially confirmed by the community. It is a masterful equilibrium where the eponymous musician brings his personal art into a dialogue with the group he comes from, without ceasing – even for a moment – to act in its name and on its behalf. For, as a folk musician, he becomes the operator of the collective knowledge and memory, he is the spirit of all the shared experiences and he is invited to express and validate them with his art every single time.⁵

Beyond the above “technical” elements, what plays a special role is the spiritual-mental condition of the artist as well as other external factors at the time of

³ Grigorios T. STATHIS, “Αυτοσχεδιασμός: Υπάρχει στη Βυζαντινή Μουσική;”, in “... τιμή προς τον διδάσκαλον...”. Έκφραση αγάπης στο πρόσωπο του καθηγητού Γρηγορίου Θ. Στάθη. A dedication for his 60th birthday and his 30 years of academic and artistic contribution, Athens, Anatolis to Periichima, 2001, pp. 682–687.

⁴ Lambros LIAVAS, “Αυτοσχεδιασμός στη λαϊκή μουσική”, available at <http://www.instruments-museum.gr/pop_print.php?lang=1&wh=5&theid=347&theid=347>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

improvisation. The musician is somehow conversing with the audience and interacts with external factors like space and acoustic, the sound quality (in case of amplification), the condition of the instrument, the time, the weather conditions, the amount and quality of the audience's response, the mental and spiritual condition of listeners at any given time etc. All this affect, to a lesser or greater extent, the final result. Ultimately, improvisation is a sonic mosaic where every single detail has a key role.

Genres

The phenomenon of improvisation appears in Hellenic music with a remarkable diversity and as consequence it is met in various names among musicians. We classify improvisation to a number of categories: those that appear as independent improvisational forms, and those that are incorporated in accompanying a song or an instrumental piece, either rhythmical or non. We also categorize improvisation according to the degree of freedom of the musician. In rhythmical improvisations the musician performs musical phrases that match the song's tempo and often he converses with it by performing phrases either along or not with the rhythm.

Regardless of the degree of freedom, improvisations obey rules that determine their characteristics. These rules do not constitute a commitment for the musician, but set the limits within which he moves. Improvisation in traditional music does not abolish the form as a means of musical expression neither it collides with it, but it constitutes another kind of form with several subcategories. Also interesting is the element of the "dialogue", which occurs very often: improvisation does not apply to a single instrument or a voice, but it is shared between two or more instruments or a voice along with instruments and it develops interactively.

In Table 1, we categorise the types of improvisation occurring as a living tradition in Greek music.

Out of these, we characterize as autonomous improvisational forms the *amanedes*, the *skaros*, the organic *moiroloi*, the *taqsimi*, some versions of rhythmical improvisation, like *gyrismata* and *versa*. The vocal *moiroloia*, table songs, "emmelis apaggelia" (intoned recitation) and some of the *gyrismata* and *versa* are classified as "limited freedom" improvisations.

1. Mixed genres

1.1 Table songs

The table, non rhythmical, songs are typically encountered in the traditions of the Greek mainland, Crete and Pontus (Black Sea). In local traditions they are called

songs of *tavlas*, *epitrapezia*, *trapeziatika*, *makryn kaite* (in Pontus), *rizitika* (in Crete) and *kleftika* (at the Peloponnesus and Central Greece), regardless of their theme. It is likely, in many cases, that in the past years they were performed as purely vocal, especially when instruments and instrumentalists were absent for various reasons. Unfortunately we can't extract reliable conclusions about this issue until the appearance of the discography in the late 19th century. Nevertheless, we consider that the participation of the instruments was not mandatory for their performance, but it certainly was more than welcome.

Table 1: Types of improvisation in Greek music

	<i>Autonomous</i>	<i>Inlaid</i>	<i>Freelancers</i>	<i>Limited</i>	<i>Non rhythmical</i>	<i>Rhythmical</i>
1. Mixed genres						
1.1 Table songs	X			X	X	
1.2 <i>Amanedes</i>	X		X		X	
2. Vocal genres						
2.1. Intoned recitation	X				X	
2.2 <i>Moiroloi</i>	X			X	X	X
3. Instrumental genres						
3.1 <i>Skaros</i>	X		X		X	
3.2 <i>Moiroloi</i>	X		X		X	
3.3 <i>Taqsimi</i>	X		X		X	
3.4 Rhythmical improvisation into pieces		X	X	X		X

The form of the table songs is of "limited freedom". It is a composition of equal extent stanza which are uttered freely and without rhythm, together with the insertion of small instrumental improvisational musical phrases. The typical structure for the songs of the Greek mainland is usually as follows:

Short instrumental improvisation with introductory character

Strophe I

Short instrumental improvisation that bridges the stanza

Strophe II

Short instrumental improvisation that bridges the stanza

Strophe III

Short instrumental improvisation that bridges the stanza

Any other strophes in the same way

The voice conveys the poetic text in a traditional, basic melodic line with some freedom to variations, but also to the development of musical phrases, depending on the vocal skills of the singer. The instruments generally follow the same logic, but with greater freedom. The improvisational musical phrases are governed by the basic melodic idea and the internal rhythmic structure of the whole structure, whilst at the same time respecting any temporal balances. It is not acceptable, for example, an instrumental response to last more than the melodic vocal theme. The only acceptable exception to this strict, although unwritten, rule might be the first introductory instrumental part.

Another diversified structure is found in the Peloponnesus and Central Greece: instead of the introductory instrumental improvisation, here we have an instrumental introduction in seven beat that is prefixed at the beginning of the song, while at the end, after the last strophe, a "tsakisma" (kink) is given.⁶ The structure of that is as follows:

Instrumental introduction in seven beat
 Strophe I
 Short Instrumental improvisation as bridge
 Strophe II
 Short Instrumental improvisation as bridge
 Strophe III
 Short Instrumental improvisation as bridge
 Any other strophes in the same way
 "Tsakisma", that is four verses in seven beat as a group song

A related, but special case of table song is the one of "Barba Giannakakis". First, it originates from the Asia Minor tradition which doesn't otherwise include table songs. Secondly, the following very interesting structure appears:

Rhythmical instrumental introduction in 4 beat
 Strophe I with a sufficient improvisational freedom. Intermediate interfering short instrumental non rhythmical responses of improvisational character
 Refrain: the poetic text is given at a specific melodic line
 Rhythmical instrumental introduction in 4 beat
 Strophe II with a sufficient improvisational freedom. Intermediate interfering short instrumental non rhythmical responses of improvisational character
 Refrain: the poetic text is given at a specific melodic line
 Finale

It is remarkable that while the poetic text is performed by the voice with a certain improvisational freedom, the musical phrases are strictly prescribed.

⁶ Konstantinos I. MARKOS, "Byzantine Ecclesiastical Music and the Demotic/Folk Song, Common Features and Differences", *Proceedings of the 1st International Conference of the American Society of Byzantine Music and Hymnology*, Pittsburgh, 2007, pp. 286-288.

1.2 *Amanes* (plural *amanedes*)

A useful tool for studying the nature of *amanedes* is again the Greek discography of 78 rpm.⁷ It covers the period from 1896 until 1960 and has preserved about 200 *amanedes* which appear to be the peak of this genre. The incorporation of *amanedes* in Greek repertoire seems as eastern influence, although scholars trace its origins in ancient Greek musical genres “skolia” or Maneros or Linaios lament.⁸ The term in the Greek language derives from the starting word “aman” (in Turkish, aman means mercy). As Thomas Apostolopoulos says:

The *amanes* is a good example of a musical form which allows the performer to demonstrate his mastery of the modes and kalophonic / hypsiphonic (soprano) technique.⁹

Their structure is similar to that of the table songs with two significant differences:

a) The *amanes* poetic text extends in two sections of a fifteen-syllable verse each, while the finale may have either a small instrumental improvisation, or a short melodic closing phrase:

Short instrumental improvisation as introduction
Verse I
Short Instrumental improvisation as bridge
Verse II
Short Instrumental improvisation as finale

Within every strophe short instrumental answers of improvisational character are inserted, while the lyrics are interspersed with meaningless words, such *amam*, *medet*, *yaleli*.

b) The melismatic rendition of the poetic text is not subject to any restrictions. The singer is free to improvise according to the mood of the moment, respecting only the *maqâm* and “general morphological principles” of *amanes*. The same goes for the musicians. The basic melodic line observed in table songs is not present here and musicians have only to follow the general morphological and stylistic attributes.

⁷ See Dionysis MANIATIS, *Η εκ περάτων δισκογραφία γραμμοφώνου*, Athens, Ministry of Culture, 2006.

⁸ Georgios, K. PHAIDROS, *Πραγματεία περί του σμυρναϊκού μανέ ή του παρ' αρχαίους Μανέρω. Ως και περί ανευρέσεως του Αιλίνου και ελληνικών ηθών και εθίμων διασωζομένων εισέτι παρά τω Ελληνικό λαώ*, Athens, Kouloura, 1990. [First edition Smyrna, 1881.]

⁹ Thomas APOSTOLOPOULOS, “The Functioning Repertoire: Organization and Elements of Forms – Ecclesiastic and Secular Modern Greek Repertoire”, in Walter FELDMAN, Mahmoud GUETTAT, Kyriakos KALAITZIDIS (ed.), *Music in the Mediterranean*, volume II “Theory”, Thessaloniki, En Chordais, Project *MediMuses* (in the frame of the European Union programme Euromed Heritage II), 2005, p. 241.

An *amanes* could be performed by rhythmical on non rhythmical instrumental accompaniment. In both cases, the instrumental and the singing parts are performed as non rhythmical. The instruments perform an *ison* (a non rhythmical accompaniment) or in the case of a rhythmical accompaniment a pattern of 4/4 or 8/8.

Very rarely, the introduction and the intermediate bridges do not constitute organic improvisational phrases, but specific melodic lines. In these cases, there is space for a short *taximi* only in the end:

Rhythmical instrumental introduction
 Verse I
 Rhythmical instrumental theme as bridge
 Verse II
 Taqsim (usual)
 Rhythmical instrumental theme or *chasapiko* dance as finale

In every strophe the instrumental answers to be inserted from phrase to phrase aren't improvisational in nature, but specific melodies. Typical examples of this version of *amanedes* are recorded in 78 rpm "Politiki Sousta" (I Poli kai o Vosporos), "Manes tis avgis", "Manes tis kalinychtias" and the "Tampachaniotikos manes" in its various versions.

The rhythmical *amanedes* appear to be the inspiration for introducing vocal and instrumental improvisations in the *balos* genre of the Cyclades islands. The music of the Cyclades was heavily influenced by the traditions of Constantinople, Smyrna and the Asia Minor coast. The *amanedes* permeate, in an unknown date, the *balos* genre, thus giving another variation of *amanes*, a "hybrid" of a full song and an *amanes*, but somewhat in a simpler form:

Rhythmical instrumental introduction
 Strophe I of the song
 Rhythmical instrumental theme as bridge
 Strophe II of the song
 Taqsim (usual)
 Verse I of *amane*
 Short instrumental improvisation as bridge
 Verse I of *amane*
 Short instrumental improvisation
 Rhythmical instrumental theme as finale

2. Vocal genres

2.1 Intoned recitation, ecphonetic cantillation (declamatory) – logaoedic mode

According to Aristidis Quintilianus¹⁰ there are three ways of enunciating the human voice. The first one is speech, the second that of song while the third one is in between. It's a special musical fashion, a kind of recitative, Homer's epics or poems and choral parts of tragedies were "chanted". Also various ordinances or formal proposals.¹¹ These ways have survived to our own day, in classical as well as in popular musical practice; in everyday occurrences, where we have a small or larger margin of improvisation. This way of delivering voice has several names according to circumstances, such as logaoedic, ecphonetic cantillation (declamatory) or "emmelis apaggelia" (intoned recitation).

The term "logaoidika meli" derives from the metric terms of prosodic songwriting, where the *melos* [melody] is a recitative and thus similar to speech. The term "karalogadin" designs the same thing.

The term is also used by Alexandros Papadiamantis in an article of his about the way of reading the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles in Church:

This logaoedic mode of recitation is very old in the practice of the Church and intrinsically Greek, as used in ancient drama, where syllables are all prolonged and especially in the ending of each sentence. The custom of enouncing the Epistles in a more melodic fashion, whereas the Gospel more simply and soberly.¹²

In the ecclesiastical musical tradition this way of enunciation is accompanied by a specific notation, the ecphonetic notation, where the margin for improvisation is markedly shorter. We meet this notation all through the 4th to the 15th centuries, while its origins can be attributed to the Greek system of making accents on Greek words as this applied by scholars in Alexandria particularly with Aristophanes the Byzantine (260 – 180 B.C.). G. T. Stathis notes:

¹⁰ Aristides QUINTILIANUS, *On Music*, book A-IV, Leipzig, Teubner, 1963.

¹¹ See Plutarch Demosthenes, 20, where Philip the Macedonian, after his victory at Cheroneia chants the beginning of Demosthenes' motion "divining it into [metrical] feet and beating time".

¹² Alexandros PAPADIAMANTIS, "Αποσπάσματα σκέψεων", in *Άπαντα*, vol. 5, critical edition N. D. Triantafyllopoulos, Athens, Domos, 1984, [first edition 1903], p. 238. A similar observation is made 100 years later by Stathis: "The Epistles were read in a more melodic fashion than the Gospels or Prophecies", Grigorios T. STATHIS, "Greek Notation for the *Psaltic* Art in Byzantine and Modern Greek musical settings", in Walter FELDMAN, Mahmoud GUETTAT, Kyriakos KALAITZIDIS (ed.), *Music in the Mediterranean*, volume I "History", Thessaloniki, En Chordais, Project *MediMuses* (in the frame of the European Union programme Euromed Heritage II), 2005, p. 289.

The function of these signs is clearly indicative and mnemonic. The ecphonic sings ... denote a *mater lectionis*, a way of declaiming from the beginning to the end of a notional phrase, or, more densely, of a word.¹³

In a contrast to the full notation system of Byzantine music, what we have here is an entirely different and simpler system which is closely related to intoned recitation. Although, since at least five centuries, this system has become obsolete, it is surviving in liturgical practice. Endings, terminations and conclusions of prayers, certain psalms which are read melodiously, gracefully and, in particular, Biblical readings keep still alive this important, classical tradition.¹⁴

In modern times, the intoned recitation has survived in veiled ways in the popular Greek tradition, for example in the shadow puppet theater, the calls of itinerant sellers, and some years ago in the *telalides* (heralds). Post-byzantine musical manuscripts preserve several such cases, since the end of the 18th century:

- *Ορίσετε στην Εκκλησίαν*, From the call of the *Laosynaktis* in *Diplokionion* [Beşiktaş] of Constantinople, [echos] plagal I, *Sabâ*: Iaşi 129, 183 / Vatopediou 1428, 187.
- *Kaskaval peniri cair peniri* From a Turkish salesman, [echos] plagal I: Iaşi 129, 183 / Vatopediou 1428, 187.
- *Lahana biber turşu* From an elderly Turkish salesman, [echos] I: Iaşi 129, 55 / Vatopediou 1428, 64.
- *Brucuk verelim* From a Turkish salesman, [echos] I: Iaşi 129, 55 / Vatopediou 1428, 64.¹⁵

One is calling to Church from the *Laosynactes* (men whose function in to invite neighbors to liturgy in Church) in Constantinople, while the other three are the transcription of the calling of Turkish itinerary seller.

2.2 *Moiroloi* (plural *moiroloia*)

The *moiroloi* is a mournful lament song associated with the loss of loved one. The first – similar to present day – laments, are mentioned by Homer in the *Iliad* (X 409, 430, 477; Ψ 19; Ω 725, 748, 768)¹⁶ where authorized bards mourn eminent dead. The custom has survived all through Greek musical tradition, reaching up to the present day. From the plethora of literary and other testimonies for the *moiroloi*, we mention the description by G. Vizyinos of a gypsy musician

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ For a recent example <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwvJjeYBvDM>>.

¹⁵ Examples from Kyriakos KALAITZIDIS, *Post-Byzantine Music Manuscripts as a source for Oriental Secular Music (15th to Early 19th Century)*, Istanbul Texte und Studien 28, Würzburg, Orient-Institut Istanbul and Ergon Verlag, 2012, p. 117.

¹⁶ Takis KALOGEROPOULOS, *To λεξικό της Ελληνικής Μουσικής*, vol. 4, Athens, Giallelis, 1998, p. 156.

who sang a lament on order, accompanied by his three-stringed lyre.¹⁷ Gradually, the lament has incorporated other forms of loss, primarily of migration.

Due to the specific character of this genre it is very difficult to give specific morphological observations of its music. In any way, the lament occurs in two forms: either with a free musical-poetic structure or with a fixed one. Given its implementation by non-musically trained persons (usually women), a margin for improvisation, although limited, exists.

3. Instrumental genres

3.1 *Skaros*

Both *skaros* and the instrumental *moiroloi* have quite common external characteristics and intense interactions with relative genres of the musical traditions of South Albania, where from times immemorial Albanians and Greeks lived together. *Skaros* is a non-rhythmical instrumental tune with strong elements of improvisation, which are found exclusively in the musical tradition of Epirus, Thessaly and the prefecture of Grevena in Macedonia. A fundamental element of inspiration is the natural environment, particularly the pastoral life. *Skaros* owes its name to the tune played by shepherds when they “skarizoun”, meaning when they take their sheep out on pasture. Therefore it is clear that initially the melody was performed exclusively by flutes named in Epirus *floghera* or *tzamara*. Then, as it is clear in all the available recordings, but also by the living practice – festivities and concerts – the melodic improvisations are organized and enriched between instruments of the troupe with the prominent role given to the clarinet and the violin.¹⁸ The structure is usual tripartite, with the three parts shared between the clarinet and the violin.

Part I: clarinet

Part II: violin

Part III: clarinet

The lute or the *santouri* (dulcimer) or any other accompanying instrument keeps the *ison*, a kind of pedal in the basic note, usually with a characteristic cumbersome to other notes.¹⁹ The *ntefi* (tambourine), either by gently tapping the membrane, or the *zilia* (cymbals) has an accompanying character. More rarely, a fast constant slipping of the middle finger to the *ntefi*'s skin, produces a special buzz.

¹⁷ George VIZYINOS, *To amáptημα της μητρός μου*, Athens, Ahetos, 1954, p. 122.

¹⁸ A similar observation is made by Kostas LOLIS, *Μοιρολόι και Σκάρος / Kaba dhe Avaze*, Ioannina, Centre for the study of Epirus and Balkan Music Tradition, 2003, p. 17.

¹⁹ *Ison* is a drone note, or a slow-moving lower vocal part, used in Byzantine chant and some related musical traditions to accompany the melody, thus enriching the singing, without at the same time transforming it into a harmonized or polyphonic piece.

Skaros is traditionally performed in *echos* plagal IV chromatic (*maqâm nikriz*) with frequent movements in pentatonic scale. The musician does not have to follow a particular melody, remaining however within the general framework designated by the oral tradition. Very often the clarinet, and particularly the violin, mimics animal voices such as birds, dogs, sheep etc, highlighting the necessary pastoral atmosphere.²⁰

3.2 Instrumental *moiroloi*

The instrumental *moiroloi* is performed traditionally in the Pogoni province of the Ioannina prefecture in Epirus. It is considered to derive from the local repertoire of vocal lament, which however is always sung *a capella*. The thematic content derives from the subjective world of the musician and has to do with the sensation of the loss of a beloved person, due either to death or to emigration, or other similar feelings of pain and even liberating joy that is expressed in a funerary or “sad” *melos*.

The formation of the content of lament was determined by various factors, historical, sociological, geographical, etc; also important was the adoption of two musical instruments from Western Europe – namely the violin and clarinet. K. Lolis aptly notes that:

The crystallization of *moiroloi* and *skaros* is largely associated with the important role of the clarinet and violin, as musical instruments of a traditional character. Given their nature of the technical structure and the ability to interpret melodies with popular features, the clarinet and the violin have become the “leaders” of the troupe.²¹

Its composition is also like this of *skaros*, invariably tripartite, with the three parts shared between the clarinet and the violin.

Part I: clarinet
Part II: violin
Part III: clarinet

Here as well the lute or the *santouri* (dulcimer) as well as any other accompanying instrument keeps the *ison*, usually with a characteristic interference to other notes. Despite his freedom, the musician has to respect the traditional forms here.

The position of dirges varies in the traditional repertoire. Like *skaros* it can exist as an independent stand-alone piece or play a role in one rhythmical piece.

²⁰ See for example <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGdlaDQh9rs>>.

²¹ Kostas LOLIS, *op.cit.*, p. 32.

Finally, the lament may often be followed by a dancing instrumental tune called “verso” or “gyrisma” (turn).²²

3.3 *Taqsimi* (plural *taqsimia*)

The term *taqsimi* was hellenized in the Greek language, and possibly the genre *per se* in its current form at least, by adopting particular stylistic and other features. The term means the introduction of a non-rhythmical improvisation, organized according to the mode-*maqâm* development. From a purely technical standpoint it is considered a form of non-rhythmical analysis – presentation – a development mode, enriched with elements of style specific to every musical instrument in the *taqsimi* tradition. The phrases, the attitudes to dominant notes and the modulations are governed by the laws of a mode in the same logic as for other genres.

Introduction of an improvisational character can also be detected in Greek antiquity, but of course the whole issue requires further investigation. The occasion is given to us by a passage from Plato’s *Laws*:

All this time, from early dawn until noon, have we been talking about laws in this charming retreat: now we are going to promulgate our laws, and what has preceded was only the prelude of them. Why do I mention this? For this reason: Because all discourses and vocal exercises have preludes and overtures, which are a sort of artistic beginnings intended to help the strain which is to be performed; lyric measures and music of every other kind have preludes framed with wonderful care.²³

We have related indications from the Byzantine and post-Byzantine period. In Greek, the introductory improvisation is found for the first time in the term *taqsimi* in post-Byzantine musical manuscripts in two different cases: the first concerns a set of manuscripts with Byzantine notation also preserving a significant number of secular music works.²⁴ Among them, we find eleven *taqsimia* transcribed by Petros of Peloponnesus, the most important Greek musician of eighteenth-century Constantinople, which are preserved in three codices dating from the late 18th to the early 19th century. Specifically, the codices are:

²² A typical example of an instrumental *moiroloi* with “gyrismata” from the emblematic recording by Petroloukas Chalkias is the following: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWI1-KKgZ0>>.

²³ PLATO, *Laws* IV, 722, d-e, translation B. Jowett, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1871, pp. 243–244. The original text: “Νόμους δὲ ἄρτι μοι δοκοῦμεν λέγειν ἄρχεσθαι, τὰ δ’ ἔμπροσθεν ἦν πάντα ἡμῖν προοίμια νόμων. Τί δὲ ταῦτ’ εἴρηκα; τόδε εἰπεῖν βουλευθεῖς, ὅτι λόγων πάντων καὶ ὅσων φωνῆ κεκοινῶνηκεν προοίμια τέ ἐστιν καὶ σχεδὸν οἷόν τινες ἀνακινήσεις, ἔχουσαι τινα ἔντεχνον ἐπιχείρησιν χρήσιμον πρὸς τὸ μέλλον περαινεσθαι. Καὶ δὴ που καθαρωδικῆς ὄδῃς λεγομένων νόμων καὶ πάσης μουσικῆς προοίμια θαυμαστῶς ἐσπουδασμένα πρόκειται”.

²⁴ Kyriakos KALAITZIDIS, *Post-Byzantine Music Manuscripts op.cit.*, pp. 97–98, 221.

Iviron Monastery of Mont Athos 997, 18th c. (around 1790), ff. 162v-168r, scribe not recorded;
 Xeropotamou Monastery of Mont Athos 305, 18th c. (late 18th - early 19th c.), ff. 313r-315v, scribe Damaskinos Monk Agraforendiniotis; and
 Xeropotamou Monastery of Mont Athos 299, 19th c. (circa 1810), pp. 534-543, scribe Nikeforos Kantouniaries.

They contain the oldest *taqsimi* transcriptions in Byzantine notation and they are either compositions of Petros himself or transcriptions made initially by Petros and later copied by other scribes. They are a series of eleven *taqsimia* in eight *echoi*, one for each *echos*, except two in *echos* III, two in *echos varys* and two in *echos* plagal IV, which bear the heading: "Proemia" (prelude), that is *taqsimia* in Turkish, pieces composed by Mr. Petros Peloponnesios.²⁵

The term *taqsimi* is also used by Apostolos Konstas in his book of book theory as an alternative name for *thesis*²⁶ of the great or slow *paraklitiki*.²⁷ This *thesis* is recorded from the old and is found in Byzantine pieces. Its origins, however, or its template is just a popular small opening preamble that evolved to a standard tune. As far as we know even this Byzantine origin *thesis* is found only in the beginning of compositions. Moreover, according to Thomas Apostolopoulos, Apostolos Konstas handles short melodies for "septet" or "manifestations of modes" for educational purposes as short *taqsimia-seyir*.

This fact, in conjunction with the absence of a *maqâm* name and the existence of only the name of the *echos* in the headings of these specific *taqsimia*, leads to the speculation that perhaps the use of the term by Petros also referred to possible introductions, or in other words, preludes, of Cherubic hymns. However, the study of their notational make-up and the nature of their musical form, classifies them as belonging to the corpus of secular music. In any case, their melodic development reflects the logic of key movements between ranges exactly as it is preserved in contemporary *taqsim* tradition in the Near East. For example, in the *taqsimi* of *echos* plagal IV²⁸ the melody moves to *echos* I and II, resting intermediately on *Vou* and on *Ga*, then moving to *echos* plagal IV heptaphonic, followed by successive downward movements towards the tonic *Ni*.

In modern times the Greek discography of 78 rpm is an important source for the study of the *taqsimi* genre. It covers a period from 1896 until 1960 and has preserved about 50 autonomous *taqsimia*. Of course those that have been recorded as introductions or as melodic bridges in table songs and *amanedes* are

²⁵ In all three codices, the *taqsimi* section is presented with the exact same title.

²⁶ Kyriakos KALAITZIDIS, *Post-Byzantine Music Manuscripts op.cit.*, p. 330: *Thesis* in Byzantine notation is a group of musical sings that summarize a longer musical phrase.

²⁷ Thomas APOSTOLOPOULOS, "The Functioning Repertoire...", *op.cit.*; , et Απόστολος Κώνστας ο Χίος και η συμβολή του στη θεωρία της μουσικής τέχνης, Athens, IBM Studies 4, 2002, p. 149.

²⁸ Its *exegesis* in the *New Method* by Thomas K. Apostolopoulos has been included in the CD "En Chordais", Petros Peloponnesios, track no 10.

not considered here. However, we take into account a sufficient number of *taqsimia* in archival and commercial recordings.

The duration of a *taqsimi* is often defined by non-artistic parameters, such as radio or concert time or, more often, the three minutes duration of the 78 rpm discography. Beyond these cases, their duration for Greek music can range from one to four minutes.

The development, the style, the modulations and the internal rhythm that govern a *taqsimi* depend on the spiritual and psychological mood of the musician, the moment and the context of the performance. Of particular importance for example in the character and style of the piece in which *taqsimi* serves as the introduction, but also the place and the performing conditions. We have a very different unfolding of the *taqsimi* in a entertainment area with more or less noise than in a listening hall, private or public with absolute silence.

3.4 Rhythmic improvisations

Rhythmical taqsimi – gyrisma – verso

In many local idioms of Greek music, improvisational forms are found in *errythma* (rhythmical) songs or instrumental pieces. It is a widely held practice in musical traditions of Eastern Mediterranean, with particular characteristics in Greek music. They present an extremely large variety both in morphological characteristics as well as in their names. Their position within each piece, although not specific, is usually placed before the finale (in songs their position traditionally is after the last stroph) and they are typically perceived as being the climax. The instrument improvises and climbs gradually to the highest pitch areas or quite often begins from there thus arousing the enthusiasm of the public. The improvisational part starts without rhythm and remains so until the finale or interpolates some rhythmical phrases following the rhythm pattern of the piece. On other occasion, the whole improvisation evolves on rhythm from the beginning to the end.

Insertion or not of improvisation in a piece depends solely on the mood and the circumstances of the moment, its duration also. Needless to say, the rhythmical improvisation performance differs dramatically in the discography, the archival recordings and concerts, when compared with the conditions of fun. In the first case the timeframe is usually quite binding and pressing. In the second, the improvisation works without any time restrictions, its only concern being the enjoyment and delight of listeners or dancers. The duration also depends on the *chartoura*, the money given by entertainers to the musician who improvises. Sometimes the improvisation becomes a “mystic interactivity”: the musician plays looking the dancer’s legs and the dancer is guided, hypnotized one would say, by the improviser. G. Papadakis mentions that

Such improvisation in dance music right at the moment that makes the so-called “spin in place” where the dancer improvises also in collaboration with the music. These improvisational moments of many musicians are so successful that they become in time fully established in the repertoire.²⁹

The above is often noticed in the provinces of Pogoni and Zagori in Epirus and is known as *verso* meaning spin (or turn). In Pogoni the *versos* are composed by a compilation of small phrases which the musician chooses from oral tradition and fixes them with others of his own. In Zagori this is done under the logic of free improvisation, bearing characteristics of a *taqsimi* within a rhythmical piece. Similar characteristics in improvisation are met in the three main dances of Central Greece and the Peloponnesus in rhythm patterns of 6/4, 7/8 and 4/4, as well as in those of Central Greece and Central Macedonia in 7/8 and 4/4.

Musical tradition in Constantinople, Smyrna, Asia Minor, Thrace and the Northeast Aegean present the same type of improvisation, called *taqsimi* and appearing almost in all kinds of rhythmical repertoire, especially in *tsifteteli* (4/8 and 8/8) and *karsilamas* (9/8).

Frequently this kind of improvisation follows a certain melodic-harmonic cycle. The improvisation rounded by a circle of three accords (I–IV–V) with two or three or four bars of rhythmic musical phrases in each accord. Sometimes, operating strictly within the modality, it moves to relative modes.

The *Rebetiko* song, is an urban tradition that flourished from the late 19th to mid 20th century. It was strongly influenced by the musical practice of the Constantinople, Smyrna and Asia Minor and incorporated the improvisation to its repertoire, both rhythmical and non-rhythmical.

Finally, a younger generation of musicians often mixes in rhythmical improvisations elements from jazz tradition, resulting in a very interesting artistic result.

A few words on regions where the improvisation is absent

In Crete, it is a common practice to run variations in the basic melody of a tune. Of course, in the Greek traditional music in general, a musician who improvises on a melody is bound by the nature of this melody and the rhythm, to avoid anything which is alien to the prevailing musical climate. In this case, the musician will move basically around the given theme using different ornamentation, trying to exploit as far as he can the technical capabilities of the instrument.

²⁹Yorgos PΑΡΑΔΑΚΙΣ, “Για τον αυτοσχεδιασμό στη μουσική”, part II, 2012, <<http://mousika.proastia.blogspot.gr/2012/11/2.html>>.

The melodies of these dances however, have no distinct structure. They comprise sort, autonomous and simple motifs, *kondylies*, which are open to improvisation and combination.³⁰

Also, before the *syrtos* dance and the acoustic songs, there occurs a very brief non-rhythmical improvisation of a few seconds, which however can hardly be characterized as *taqsimi*. The main contributors to this trend is the Koutsourelis (lute) and Stelios Foustalierakis or Foustalieris (*bulgari*).³¹

In Pontus there are common short non-rhythmical introductions in laments and other table songs as well as “prologues” to rhythmical songs and tunes. Also, the musician performs the instrumental repertoire with variations in the basic melody of a tune. In Dodecanese we observe a complete absence of musical improvisations. However, the poetic has such intensity and influence that the lyricist should sing completely new *mandinades* (two verse lyrics) and never repeat them or otherwise risks becoming the target of endless satirical comments for a long time!

To conclude, improvisation is a phenomenon with a long tradition and great variety in Greek music. It appears in classical and folk traditions both on vocals and instrumental genres and in both cases, as a mixed genre. Sometimes there is a large degree of freedom in improvisation and sometimes the extent of leeway allowed to the performer is more limited. In any case, the improvisation always obeys the rules of the tradition in which it is integrated. In other words, it is another imprinting of the relationship between the Greek traditional people with the natural and social environment.

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³⁰ Yorgis AMARGIANAKIS, *Κρητική Μουσική Παράδοση, Οι Πρωτομάστορες 1920–1955*, Heraklion, Aerakis – Cretan Musical Workshop, 1994, p. 21. See related, same author, « Η μουσική του Στρατή Καλογερίδη », dans *Efstratios Kalogeridis, Κρητική μουσική (1)*, Heraklion, Municipality of Heraklion, 1985, p. 10 and Eirini THEODOSIOPOULOS, “Οι ‘σκοποί’ στην ελληνική παραδοσιακή μουσική. (Σημασιολογική και μουσικολογική προσέγγιση)”, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Athens, 2003 (summary at <http://digitalcrete.ims.forth.gr/MusicalRoutes/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15:2008-10-20-11-24-03&catid=6:2008-10-20-11-23-07&Itemid=117>.)

³¹ Foustalieris relations with Rebetiko musicians of Piraeus and in particular with Batis which were strengthened during the period of his stay in Piraeus from 1934 to 1937 are well known.

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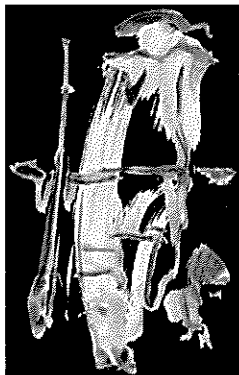
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