

Types of melisma in the traditional songs of central Macedonia

Τύποι μελισμάτων σε παραδοσιακά τραγούδια της Κεντρικής Μακεδονίας

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I. TOPIC

In this presentation I examine the same melismatic song performed by three different performers. The title of the song is ‘Ksenos imoun kai irtha tora’ [I was a stranger and now I returned] and the three performers are from village Mesolakia in Serres. The village is located at the South East of the department of Serres very close to the departments of Kavala and Drama. I have chosen to examine singers from the same region, in order to explore the common elements and influences, the differentiations, and particularities of individual performance, with regards to the *melismatic* modes they use. This study is based on my PhD research, which is focused on the examination of the melismatic songs found in central Macedonia and specifically in the area around the Paggaion Mountain, in Halkidiki, as well as in several villages in Nigrita, Serres. After conducting my field research, I discovered that there is a large number of common songs found in that wider region; this means musical-poetical elements, which indicate common characteristics of this area. This conclusion was reinforced by the discussion I had with the performer Kostas Varitis, who pointed out that in his village, located at the foot of Paggaion Mountain, many farmers from Halkidiki had moved something that resulted in the exchange of cultural elements between the two regions.

The fieldwork was carried out in December 2010 by Yiannis Partozis and in February and March 2011 by Yiannis Kaimakis and me. The performers that took part in the recording are Kostas Varitis (64 years old), Vasilis Nenos (63 years old) and Vasilis Goumanos (72 years old).

II. MELISMA - MELISMATIC SONGS

The term *melisma* is used in phonetic music in order to describe the way that the text is being distributed in the melody. Specifically it refers to a group of notes that correspond to only one syllable.

According to the MGG dictionary, whether a group of notes will be defined as *melisma* or not, is not determined by a least number of notes that comprise it. It is determined by the average number of notes in analogy to the wider context and type of song that these are included¹.

In this respect, songs can be distinguished in two categories; The *melismatic* and the *syllabic*. Normally in the syllabic songs there is only one note corresponding to each syllable, so the rare *melismas* that appear include not more than three or four notes. On the contrary, in the melismatic songs there are only few syllables that are not embellished by *melismas*. As Baud-Bovy suggests, this distinction between is a common element of the Greek traditional music with the ecclesiastic music². As in the Byzantine music, where the musical parts are being distinguished between fast and slow³, the performers of traditional music divide the songs in *horeftika* [dancing songs] and *kathistika* [sedentary] or *epitrapezia* [table songs].

As Yiannis Kaimakis observes in the case of Valtetsi in Arkadia, when the table songs are being performed in groups, the different melismas of each performer that lead to consonances between common musical phrases, result in a simultaneous *poly-melody*⁴. Something very similar to this was observed in the group performances of table songs in Mesolakia; with the difference that there is a main performer, who has a leading role among the others, whilst there are also some parts with *isokratimata* [pedal points]. As the performers pointed out to me:

*Always in these songs each one will sing a verse and the others
will follow.*

In addition, Vasilis Nenos -one of the performers- suggested that what makes a singer's voice distinctive is the *gyrismata* [turnings] he does (by *gyrismata* he means the melismas).

¹ Andreas Haug, "melisma", *MGG 6* (1997), p. 19.

² Samuel Baud-Bovy, *Δοκίμιο για το ελληνικό δημοτικό τραγούδι*, Πελοποννησιακό Λαογραφικό Ίδρυμα, Ναύπλιο 1984, p. 21.

³ For more informations see Μάριος Δ. Μαυροειδής, *Οι μουσικοί τρόποι στην Ανατολική Μεσόγειο. Ο βυζαντινός ήχος, το αραβικό μακάμ, το τούρκικο μακάμ*, επιμ. Μ. Μαυροειδή, εκδόσεις Fagotto, Αθήνα 1999, p. 99.

⁴ Ιωάννης Καϊμάκης, *Δημοτικά τραγούδια από το Βαλτέτσι Αρκαδίας*, Ακαδημία Αθηνών Κέντρο Ερεύνης Ελληνικής Λαογραφίας, Αθήνα 2010, p. 51.

In my attempt to locate a *basic melody*, in the sense of what Rudolf Brandl calls *Grundstruktur*⁵ in his research about *skopos* in the music of Karpathos, I asked from the performers to sing the song without the melismas. Kostas Varitis initially answered that he can do it, but after giving it a second thought he said that it is impossible for him. Vasilis Nenos, on the other hand attempted to sing the song but finally his performance included all the melismas. This leads to the conclusion that the melismas are not simply ‘embellishing elements’ for the table songs but they are an important structural material of their melody. In a similar way, Brandl observes the impossibility to separate the ornaments from the melodic structures (*Melodiemodelle*) in the music of Karpathos, something that constitutes an important difference from the baroque tradition of Central Europe⁶.

It is also interesting that the phenomenon of interspersion and condensation of themes with smaller embellishing motifs, which are repeated and alternated, is also a distinctive attribute in folk art⁷. The similarities between a traditional handiwork and a table song rich in melismatic embellishments can be illustrated by the following image⁸ [image 1⁹].

III. TRANSCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

For the better understanding between the text and the melody in the transcriptions I have done, I indicate the musical phrases with small letters above the pentagram and the verses and semi-verses with capital letters under the text.

As already mentioned, I have attempted to locate a ‘basic melody’ of the song. After examining the transcriptions and listening to the recordings thoroughly, I realised the difficulty to distinguish between the primary and secondary elements of the melodic line. For this reason, I have chosen to represent the melodic path with *melodic arcs*.

Here I would like to point out that apparently I have not analysed all the melismas, firstly for the economy of time and secondly because I focus on the most important ones. This means that I have chosen –with personal criteria- those melismas that significant for the initial purpose of my study. Apart from that my intention is not to go into a wide and general

⁵ Rudolf Maria Brandl – Diether Reinsch, *Die Volksmusik der Insel Karpathos. Die Lyramusik von Karpathos. Eine Studie zum Problem von Konstanz und Variabilität Instrumentaler Volksmusik am Beispiel einer Griechischen Insel 1930-1981*, Edition Re, Göttingen 1992, p. 57.

⁶ Rudolf Maria Brandl – Diether Reinsch, *op.cit.*

⁷ see Εθνική Τράπεζα της Ελλάδος, *Νεοελληνική χειροτεχνία*, Αθήνα 1969, p. 162

⁸ Maria Alexandrou refers a corresponding parallelism, between the art of hagiography and the one of Byzantine chanting. (see Μαρία Αλεξάνδρου, *Εξηγήσεις και μεταγραφές της βυζαντινής μουσικής. Σύντομη εισαγωγή στον προβληματισμό τους*, University Studio Press, Θεσσαλονίκη 2010, p. 48.)

⁹ Εθνική Τράπεζα της Ελλάδος, *op.cit.*, p. 164.

analysis, but rather to demonstrate an indicative example of the different ways that each performer uses the melismas.

IV. ANALYSIS OF THE MUSICAL PHRASES

Most of the song is based on a Re mode with a lowered fourth degree¹⁰. Peristeris, calls this a diatonic Re with *chroa β*¹¹. In addition the note of the second degree is not stable¹²

Looking at the transcriptions, one can observe at first that the melody is shared in four musical phrases. The endings at the first, third and fourth phrases are on the tonic [Re] and the second is on the III degree [Fa]. This happens in all three versions of the song [image 2].

With regards to the correspondence between the text and the melody, it is remarkable that the division of the syllables varies in each performer and every musical phrase. More specifically, the first 3-5 syllables of each semi-verse are condensed at the beginning of the melodic phrases, indicating a syllabic type [image 3]. As I have observed from my research, this is a common phenomenon in melismatic songs with a free rhythm. A possible explanation could be the intention of the performer to make the text more comprehensible before developing the melismatic embellishments against the lyrics.

Isolating the same phrase from each transcription –for instance γ- and taking out the syllables, one could assume at first that this is a part of three different songs [image 4]. However, a closer observation reveals a number of common characteristics. In what follows I shall examine its phrase separately in order to illustrate these similarities as well as the differences between the three performers.

1. First phrase (α)

The context of the interval ratios of the notes in phrase (α) is the same in all three performances. However, the range in Goumanos' performance is slightly different from the other two, since it contains the subtonic while it does not contain the three-semitone of the basic mode [image 5].

¹⁰ In this presentation I have focused on melismata, therefore in the transcriptions I have done, I don't refer to the symbolism of micro-intervals in great detail. Consequently, I have symbolized only with arrows (↑↓) the spots including intense differences.

¹¹ Σπ. Περιστερίης – Γ. Σπυριδάκης, *Ελληνικά δημοτικά τραγούδια*, vol. Γ', έκδοση Ακαδημίας Αθηνών, Αθήνα 1968, εισαγωγή, p. ιβ'-ιγ'.

¹² This is also rife in the musical tradition of other countries. (see Samuel Baud-Bovy, *op.cit.*, p. 10, footnote.)

Another common characteristic between Varitis' and Nenos' performances is the course of the melisma's melody, which develops on the penultimate syllable of the semi-verse. In the case of Goumanos' performance the whole progression is simpler [image 6].

Common in all three performances is the final melisma, which starts from the III degree and ends on the tonic [image 7].

2. Second Phrase (β)

In this phrase the performers continue within the same context of the interval ratios as before. However, they increase their degree, especially Varitis and Nenos, who they still move within the same degree [image 8].

Even though the degrees of the three performers are not the same, they all follow the same *melodic path* [image 9].

In the second phrase it is impressive that both Varitis and Nenos develop the very same melisma, based on different syllables. Varitis' is on the 5th and Nenos' is on the 3rd [image 10]. With a more careful observation one can see that not only the melisma but the whole phrase is the same in both performances, with some small rhythm-melodic differences. In other words, the melody does not change essentially, but what it changes is the placement of the syllables on it. This suggests that in this part it is the melody and not the text that prevails in the memory of the performers [image 11].

On the other hand, there is a common part of the melisma that can be indicated –between Varitis and Goumanos- that appears before the final melisma [image 12].

As for the final melisma Varitis uses the one from the previous phrase, while Nenos and Goumanos perform it in a more embellished way [image 13]. It should be pointed out here that even though schematically the final melisma seems to be the same (especially in the case of Varitis) we actually have a new listening since the intervals change.

3. Third Phrase (γ)

In phrase γ the context of the interval ratios of the notes change and the chromatic listening fades away for a while. This happens until its intermediate point approximately and then it returns to its initial structure. With regards to the range, while Goumanos and Nenos increase further up, Varitis, on the other hand, remains restrained [image 14].

The beginning of the third phrase, including the melisma in the 3rd syllable is the same in Goumanos' and Nenos' performances [image 15].

In addition, in the middle of the musical phrase approximately we observe a melisma in Goumanos' performance, which is part of Varitis' melisma. It is actually the same melisma, based on the very same syllable, but in the case of Varitis it is more embellished [image 16].

Overall, Varitis and Nenos follow the same *melodic path* while in the case of Goumanos' performance the whole progression is again simpler [image 17].

The final melisma is in all three performances the same as the one in phrase α [image 18].

4. Fourth Phrase (δ)

In the fourth phrase the context of the interval ratios of the notes change again in the first half of the phrase. In all three performances the range is almost the same, even though this time it expands downwards [image 19].

In this phrase, we see again the performers follow the same *melodic path*, while developing different melismas [image 20].

A common part of the melisma appears in both Nenos and Varitis just before the end [image 21].

The final melisma of this phrase is also the same in all three performances [image 22].

According to the aforementioned we conclude that:

- The *sound material*¹³ in all three performances is the same [image 23].
- Varitis' and Nenos' ranges are almost the same, while Goumanos' is shorter especially in the phrases β and γ [image 24]
- The *melodic path* is in general terms the same in all three performances, with a small exception in Goumanos' performance and especially in the phrases α and γ , where it is simpler [image 25].
- Common melismas or parts of melismas appear more frequently between Varitis and Nenos, while they are more rare between Goumanos and the other two [image 26]
- The final melismas appear to be the same in all three performances¹⁴ [image 27].

¹³ The term (*ihitiko yliko*) is used by Baud-Bovy to describe the context of the interval ratios of the notes in which the melody initiates. (Samuel Baud-Bovy, *Κουτσοβλάχικα τραγούδια της Θεσσαλίας*, μτφρ. Δέσποινα Μαζαράκη, εκδοτικός οίκος αδελφών Κυριακίδη, Θεσσαλονίκη 1990, p. 18.)

According to these we can conclude that Varitis and Nenos have more things in common in their performances than with Goumanos [image 28]. It is interesting that during my conversation with Varitis, he mentioned that in his opinion Goumanos sings differently than him. He believes that Goumanos belongs to the ‘old school’ of performers like their grandfathers, who used to be simpler and more abrupt in their performances without many *spasimata* [voice breakings] (by *spasimata* he means the melismas). Nenos agreed also with this point, adding that Goumanos is not a good singer, because he sings with the ‘old style’ and ‘like a villager’. Of course the truth is that Goumanos does not perform less melismas than the other two performers, but his range of melismas is more restricted to two or three sounds. This probably what Varitis means when he says that Goumanos’ performances are more ‘abrupt’.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We listened to three different versions of the same melismatic song. By listening to them one can understand that their melodic phrases vary. This has been discerned from the previous analysis, where it has been shown that: The ranges of the musical phrases and the melismas, the distribution of the text on the music, as well as the melismas are not always the same among the three performers. However, the singers assert that they sing the same song; so the question is which are these elements that makes talk about the same song? Of course, the first element is the common lyrics; but what about the music?

In my attempt to give an answer to this question I focused on those elements that are common among the three performers and those elements that are being preserved more in their memory through oral tradition. These elements, as they have been studied and analyzed through the transcriptions, always in relation to the scholastic listening of the performances, are as follows:

1. The *context of the interval ratios of the notes* in the musical phrases.
2. The endings of the phrases.

¹⁴ Relative to this conclusion is the note of Tsianis, about a specific type of ending a melodic phrase, found in the songs of Skyros. (Σωτήριος Τσιάνης, *Δημοτικά τραγούδια της Σκύρου*, Κέντρο Ερεύνης της Ελληνικής Λαογραφίας της Ακαδημίας Αθηνών, Αθήνα 2003, p. 27.)

3. The *melodic path* of the musical phrases and the song in general.
4. Some of the melismatic types, including the final ones.

In this respect, it could be suggested that the above elements constitute the basis of an ‘internal melody’, which though its embellishment with melismas, according to the performer’s personal style, leads to the creation of new musical phrases each time. In other words, these four elements form the framework in which each performer creates his ‘own song’ by exchanging elements with the others. At this point I would say that this remark reminds me of the notion of *skopos*, as employed by Rudolf Brandl in his study on the music of Karpathos¹⁵.

It should be pointed out, however, that the three performers know each other. My findings could be different if the situation was not so or this research was carried out in a different period –even if it was based on the same performer-.

Finally, I would like to present the comments made by one of the performers, which in my opinion underpin the previous concluding remarks. In a discussion I had with Kostas Varitis about the issue he stated that:

There can be variations in the table songs. It will be of course on the same tune, but each performer makes his personal additions in order to make the song more beautiful. Each one makes his own ‘voice breakings’ in the way he feels it. They are coming spontaneously. One will make a voice breaking; the other might say it more simply. I never change the words; however, as far as the music is concerned I might go out of my way a little bit.

And he concludes that:

When I like some ‘breakings’ made by others I ‘steal’ them; they get inside me. Maybe not immediately, but gradually I learn them.

¹⁵ «skopos oder echos ist der musikalisch-syntaktische Zentralbegriff der karpathischen Musik. Er ist nicht das Skelett, sondern dieses ist ein Teil von ihm. Seine Definition ist weitgehend pragmatisch-syntaktisch. Er setzt sich aus verschiedenen Teilen (meist zwei, gelegentlich ein verselbständigter, variiertes drittes) zusammen, wobei jedes meros einen typischen tonos (Spannungsbogen) hat. Diese Teile sind häufig mit Textzeilen verbunden. Der skopos selbst läßt sich auf einige typische melische Figuren, die ihn zusammensetzen, reduzieren, für die aber kein Terminus gefunden wurde. Auf der Realisationsebene wird der skeletos (‘Grundstruktur’ oder ‘tonale Ebenen’) mit doxaries ausgestaltet, die in unseren Analysen mit ‘Fiorituren und Spielfiguren’ bezeichnet werden. Hier liegt der kreative Hauptanteil der individuellen Gestaltung.» (Rudolf Maria Brandl – Diether Reinsch, *op.cit.*, p.59.)