

*The Transcription of Ornamentation in Greek Traditional Music from the
Prevalence of the Western Notation System and Onwards*

*Η Καταγραφή της Διαποίκιλσης στην Ελληνική Παραδοσιακή Μουσική από την
Ευρεία Διάδοση της Δυτικής Σημειογραφίας και Μετά*

Ioannis Zarias

Department of Musical Science and Art, University of Macedonia, Greece

Good evening.

In this present announcement I will refer to the transcription of ornamental elements in Greek Traditional Music (GTM) from the prevalence of the occidental notation system and onwards.

The transcription and notation of ornamental elements, used in Greek Traditional Music (GTM), has long kept the interest of many relevant researchers. These elements –the interpretation of which depends mainly on the performer’s musical command, both of the melody as well as of the instrument or voice– hold a very special role in effecting the idiomatic character of the referred music style. Therefore, a series of different systems of transcription have developed so as to serve the occasional corresponding research purposes.

Given the limitations in both duration and quantity of such an article of the present predicament, I considered it paramount to shift the focus of this thematic elaboration chronologically from the prevalence of the occidental system of notation within the Greek peninsula and onwards –thus, approximately from the 19th century and up to the present– separating it, in turn, in three fundamental successive periods. Through the retrospection of the ornamentation transcriptions in the GTM performances –a retrospection which this article presents– on the one hand, an attempt is made to examine the various methods that have, on instances, been applied, as much concerning the notating of the examined practice but also concerning the classification of its profoundly diverse sub-cases, and on the other hand, to have certain conclusions arise and also to give some pointers in concern with the handling of the examined practice in relation to the contemporary needs of musicology.

“First” Period of Transcriptions of the GTM (late 18th – mid 19th century)

It is true that with the lapse to the 19th century, the musical reality in the Greek peninsula begins to undergo important changes. Concurrently with the prevalence of the European system of notation, the first GTM transcriptions according to that system are observed, which, in their majority, are realized by European travelers of the time. These reported musical writings are in the most part published separately in various foreign works and magazines of the time, and trace, almost in their entirety, only the “main” notes of the melody. In certain cases, however, some elementary ornaments are been notated, which represent the very first tangible traces of ornamentation in the GTM.

According to Anogeianakis (1991: 42) and Dimitris Themelis (1984: 53), certain –very few however– published transcriptions of the mentioned category are detected even as early as the late 18th century. I indicatively mention the eldest transcription that I have managed to find –a “cypriot dance”– which is included in a 1767 transcript of Blainville. Moreover, just to note, the eldest most rudimentary transcription of GTM adornments that I have found in western transcription, is in reference with the island dance music syrto titled “Dance of the residents of the islands of the Archipelagos”, that Jean Benjamin de Laborde has recorded and published in his essay: *Essai sur la Musique...*, Paris, 1780; part of which can be found republished in transcripts of Dimitris Themelis. (o.c.: 57)

The music texts, however, of the referred as “first” period of transcriptions –that dates up until the mid 19th century approximately– despite their valuable nature, can be characterized as –according to Hapsoulas (2000: 158)– “scientifically inaccurate”, and it is highly probable –as Goulaki-Voutira observes (1990: 13)– “that they abstain a great deal from reality”. The above hypothesis is confirmed indirectly by Dimitris Themelis who indicates that some of the transcribers in question report in their texts’ prologues “...about the problem that they faced while transcribing these songs. Indeed, some of them mentioned that they played them to Greeks who responded by saying that the songs sounded French” (1984: 76-7). From the above, we are arguably led to the hypothesis that traditional music of the time included, largely, elements of idiomatic performance, which foreign transcribers –being accustomed to the rules of western-European music theory– found it difficult, probably, to comprehend in depth and to etch in detail on the pentagram. Therefore, the referred transcriptions, perhaps, lack in idiom. For furthering in the “first” period of transcriptions, I indicatively refer you to Dimitris Themelis’ text (o.c.: 53-84)

The “Second” Period of GTM Transcriptions (mid 19th – mid 20th century)

A “second” period of transcriptions with significant changes is signalled from the second half of the 19th century and onwards –at least until the “official” coming of the first recording media in Greece, around the 1930es, when things change even more so. Transcriptions are realised from Greeks as well –who occasionally use the *New Byzantine notation system*– they are systemised, and often published in editions (Dragoumis 1984: 89). The first important such edition, in which there are outlined certain ornamental elements, is that of L.A. Bourgault-Ducoudray, in European notation, which is published in Paris the year 1876. A related excerpt is cited below, in which the noted ornamental element is indicated within the margin:

Transcription: Bourgault-Ducoudray (1876).

Some of the principal systematic transcribers that can be further found, during the period in question, are: N. Fardys, P. Filanthidis, An. Sigalas (1880), Ep. Stamatiadis (1887), H. Pemot (1903), G. Pahtikos (1905), K. Psahos (1925), M. Merlie (1931), Baud-Bovy (1935-8), and others. For further indexing of the various transcribers of the period in question and their respective publications, I indicatively refer you to the works of: Merlie (1935:20-1), and Spyridakis and Peristeris (1999: η´-ια´).

Further down, there is set forth a pertinent excerpt of one of the transcriptions realized by Pernot on Chios island in the year 1903. It is a recorded part of the piece entitled: “Hasapiko” as was performed then by some unknown native violinist. According to Merlie (1935: 20), the discussed music pieces recorded by Pernot, are the first Greek songs to ever be recorded with a “portable phonograph”. It is particularly possible, therefore, the transcriptions in question to constitute the very first confirmed systematic impressions of ornamentation in GTM in the specialized case, indeed, of violin performance.

Transcription: Pernot (1903)

All the same, as Anogianakis observes (1991: 42) referring to the above mentioned transcriptions of the “second” period: “This edition [that of Bourgault-Ducoudray] as much as most of those that followed, although in all fairness most valuable, they scarcely are of any real assistance nowadays in our study of demotic song”. It is a fact that, even though the basic

structure of the melody, in the discussed transcriptions, is recorded, in the most part, in a greater extend of detail, compared to those of the “first” period, the portrayal of the various idiomatic elements of interpretation is not given the appropriate attention. Most of them consist of “prescriptive” rather than “descriptive” transcriptions –as Ellingson (n.d.) and Seeger (1958: 184) would characterize them– resulting in confirming, in this way –especially as far as idiomatic practices are concerned– Anogianakis’ pre-stated opinion. Respectively, Chianis reports:

“In a culture such as Greece, melodic ornamentation is such a fundamental and integral aspect of the music that oversimplified musical transcriptions and the fact that only slight distinctions have been made between vocal and instrumental melodic lines have not only resulted in erroneous representation and interpretation, but have distorted –if not completely destroyed– the many essential melodic characteristics of this highly melismatic music.”

The “Third” (Contemporary) Period of GTM Transcriptions (mid 20th century-today)

It is true that the ‘landscape’ begins to modify greatly after the mid 20th century when, as Anogiakis observes (o.c.: 43): “The compilations of demotic melodies began to live up to the contemporary demands of musicology”. Researchers with relative musicological skills begin, thus, to wade into the transcription of GTM, who –thanks to the increased popularity of the tape-recorder– first record the traditional melodies and later proceed in editing them. In regard to, the transcription of various stylistic elements of performance, at least in comparison with the two previous “periods” of transcriptions, generally speaking, there is given a greater degree of attention. A most representative example of this, are the transcriptions conducted during the 1950^{es} and 1960^{es} by researchers of the Research Center of Greek Folklore of the Athens Academy (RCGF) –upon respective assignments of the organization– such are: Spiridakis, Peristeris, Karakasis, Tsianis, Dimitropoulos, Oikonomidis and others. Indicatively, a related example follows in which one can distinguish the imprint of certain idiomatic performance practices. It is an excerpt of a transcription from the instrumental part of the song: “Like Orias’ Castle” as it was performed by the folk violinist from Kithnos Island: Kostantinos Gonidakis, transcribed by Sotirios Tsianis, 1959.

Transcription: RCGF-Tsianis (1959)

In fact, in the introduction of the pivotal publication in question of Spiridakis and Peristeris (1968) –which by the way includes the above mentioned transcription–, is found one of the first occurrences in Greek bibliography of such a concise elaboration in methodology related to the use of various specialized symbols for the impression of idiom. The writers, however, report accordingly (o.c.: ιζ´-ζ´):

“...as for the musical notating of the elements, concerning style... we are presented with grave difficulty, for the overcoming of which there must precede adequate musicological research of the issues in question.”

As it should be expected, during the discussed time, the technical and theoretical straits of transcribing the various idiomatic details of GTM had begun, thus, to present themselves poignantly and to concern in depth –to this day, nonetheless– the respective scholars.

Two of the very first transcripts –having a lasting effect through time, however– in which, issues of interpretation of idiomatic elements of GTM, in the performance, are examined to a great extend, compared to the Greek standards of the time, are: the first, the book on *laiko klarino* (folk clarinet) of Mazaraki (1984 [1st edition. 1959]), from which, an entire chapter is especially dedicated to the musical ornaments and melismata and, the second, an article of Chianis (1966), which deals with the issue of ornamentation per se as it occurs in the music of central Greece. Both of these reference books are, till this day, two of the most significant books in Greek bibliography, as much from a methodological aspect as far as the categorization of the different ornamental elements is concerned, as well as due to its especially detailed manner in which these elements have been notated.

Indicatively, excerpts from the above mentioned books follow, in which the method that the corresponding writers use for the proper imprinting of certain ornamentation practices is evident, such are: certain forms of ornaments, melodic variations, etc. In the first excerpt that follows –from Chianis’ related article– the movement of the melody itself is imprinted: on the above pentagram in simple form, on the pentagram bellow in ornamented form, and their basic common structure is also highlighted, with tilting verticals. It is in fact a transcription excerpt of the tune of Roumeli: “I Zwitsa mou”, as it was performed by the folk clarinetist Apostolos Stamelos:

Transcription: Chianis (1996)

Similar, with certain alterations however, is Mazaraki's method of imprinting melodic variations, who has simultaneously attempted a type of comparative study amongst the discussed variations. The transcribed excerpt is from the verse of the *tsamiko* tune from Roumeli: "O Grivas":

Transcription: Mazaraki (1959)

From the 1970^{es} until today, the editions with transcriptions of GTM gradually obtain an increasingly specialized character and continuously grow in numbers –often each of them refer to either a specialized region and or era of Greece. Moreover, as far as the mode of transcription of the various performing elements of style is concerned –when they are indeed transcribed– there prevails, in general, a tendency towards transcribing them in the European notation system with the utmost precision possible –“descriptive” thus transcriptions–, avoiding the ad hoc symbols. An indicative such example are the transcriptions of Kavakopoulos (1981, 1993) of the 1980^{es}, 1990^{es}. The transcription that you see below is an excerpt from the tune of Thrace: “Monahougiou ou Koustantis”.

Transcription: Kavakopoulos (1981)

The last two decades, especially, thus, due to the remarkable progress in the field of ethnomusicology in Greece, several researches which are directly linked to the transcription of GTM are realized, as much from separate individuals as also from related organizations and state committees, such for example are: RCGF, the Folklore Institution of Peloponnese, the Asia Minor Studies Center, the Greek University musical studies departments, the “Friends of Music Society” association, and others. Given, however, the limitations imposed on the length of this article, I thought it redundant to proceed in an extensive indexing of related publications. Besides, writings of the category in question are fairly easily traceable in related libraries, as well as in bookshops. Indicatively, I cite an excerpt from the transcriptions of Katsouras (2001) in the context of his diplomatic essay in the present musical Department, in which the “descriptive” imprinting of certain ornamental elements becomes evident. Following, is a transcription excerpt of the tune from Epirus “Papadia”, as it was performed by the folk violinist Evangellos Tillis:

Transcription: Katsouras (2001).

It is true, that during the last few years there has been considerable progress –from the part of the celebrated scientific community– in developing a context of inquiries and debate, about the systemization of the transcripts of the discussed musical genre, as well as about the conjuring up of suitable methods in order to tend to the reoccurring needs of research. Besides, as Tsardakas observes (1998: 16): “the question of musical notation is a methodological issue of paramount importance for all those that dabble with oral musical traditions, where inherent systems of transcription are absent”. Generally speaking of course, the adopting of one of the respective methodologies –from the part of transcribers– is linked sometimes with a series of factors, such as : the method of the occasional on-the-spot research, generally the point of view and politics of the occasional transcriber, the more specialized field that he/she researches –i.e. the musical instrument, geographic location, time period, etc.–, and, in a more general scheme obviously, the occasional special needs of his/hers endeavor. Consequently, depending on what exactly is intended to emerge through a given sum of transcriptions, it is very likely that different transcription methods will be applied upon demand. Especially though, as far as the study of the ornamentation practice is concerned, since there often evolve unusually alternative transcription systems, which are based on the variations of western classical notation (Ellingson n.d.). Spiridakis and Peristeris, (1999: 1ε´) –as early as the 1960^{es}– indicate that:

“...wherever this [European notation system] falls short of stating the melodic and rhythmic peculiarities [of GTM], complementary diction should be used so as to ensure that these musical peculiarities are conveyed in the utmost accuracy.”

Approaching the end of this article I would like to note that despite the progress that has indeed been realized in the last few years in the field of GTM transcriptions, the scientific tradition’s material that refers mainly to the imprinting and the in depth investigation of the various ornamentation practices that are used in its performance, is still, in the greater scheme of things, sufficiently insufficient. More specifically, actually, the research field that deals with the idiomatic manner of performance of the Greek traditional instruments –which is obviously directly linked to the investigation of the way of performing the practice of ornamentation– remains, till this day, to a great extend unexplored. As Sarris points out (2007: 34-5):

“...the transcriptions of instrumental music that have been published are quite few, through which one can obtain an indicative image about the repertoire, the performance techniques and the peculiarities of some given [traditional] instrument”.

Consequently, in order for the contemporary researcher of GTM to understand in depth each interpretive style he/she examines, I think that it is requisite for him/her to study carefully the corresponding performance practices of ornamentation, since they in fact contribute to an especially defining degree in the interpretation of a given style. In fact, for the in depth study of the particular practice, I consider that the “descriptive” transcription of its various elements –where ideally all the stylistic characteristics of the musical sound are attributed, such as for example: ornaments, microtones, rhythmic differentiations, and so on, in order for a morphological analysis of these characteristics to be able to take place later– it could be one of the most significant related methodological tools. Another, also important, functional resource for the most precise study of the enquired practice may be the comparative study method between differently ornamented –though common– melodies. The two above mentioned methods are most suited especially in our days, while any given researcher has the opportunity, on the one hand to accumulate a great number of different performances of a given piece that he/she wishes to study, and on the other hand, he/she can audit these performances –utilising the appropriate technology– thoroughly.

To conclude then, as an indicative application of the above mentioned pointers for an in depth study of ornamentation in contemporary times, I cite the following example of a comparative study as well as of a “descriptive” transcription of twelve different ornamented fragments of the traditional piece entitled: “Aptaliko” –namely the first three meters–, which have been performed respectively by twelve different violinists-performers of the genre, and have been recorded and transcribed by myself.

Thank you, have a nice audience.

Transcription: Ioannis Zarias (2009). “Descriptive” transcription & comparative study of twelve different violin performances of the dance “Aptaliko” (first three meters).