

The lavta: Origins and evolution; its relation to the old type of Greek lute

Η λάφτα. Προέλευση και εξέλιξη. Η σύνδεσή της με τον παλαιό τύπο ελληνικού λαούτου

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Introduction

The lavta is an instrument that belongs to the wider family of lutes. In recent years the lute has gained great popularity in Turkey and particularly in Greece. Especially in these countries there is an excessive interest not only for learning to play the instrument but also for researching its origins as well. This paper will attempt to give some answers to the question on whether this instrument is a manufacture according to the models of instruments of the Middle East or is it connected to the type of lute that existed in the Greek peninsula. The main obstacle of such a research –which is common in studying the traditional instruments–, is the lack of sufficient written bibliography that could possibly demonstrate the history and origins of the instrument. It is worth to mention the fact that prestigious international scientific dictionaries such as the “*The New Grove dictionary of musical instruments*”¹ or the *MGG*² do not refer this particular instrument as Lavta. In addition to that during my research in archives in Greece and Istanbul I did not come across to any written references regarding the history of the instrument. There are brief references in the books of Walter Feldman³, Harold Agopian⁴ as well as in the book Laurence Picken *Folk Musical Instruments of Turkey*.⁵ Therefore, in this paper I approach the main issue based on a) iconographic sources b) some limited bibliography c) and oral sources.

¹The New Grove Dictionary of musical instruments, Stanley Sandy, Macmillan Press Limited, London, 1984

² Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart, εκδ. Bärenreiter Metzeler, Kassel, 1994

³ Feldman, Walter, *Music of the Ottoman Court: Makam, Composition and the Early Ottoman Instrumental Repertoire*, Berlin, VWB, 1996

⁴ Agopian, Harold, *Tanburi Cemil Bey Vols. IV & V*, Traditional Crossroads, 2003

⁵ Picken, Laurence, *Folk musical instruments of Turkey*, Oxford University Press, London, 1975

Name Definition

We can come across with several different names indicating the same instrument. In Greece the instrument is called Lute from Istanbul (*Politiko Laouto*) or *Lafta*. *Laouto* (either *lağouto* or *lavouto*) is the Greek name for lute, while *lavta* is the Turkish term used for this instrument. However, it should be noted that today in Turkey the term *lavta* is used to identify different types of lutes according to the region of origin (e.g. the Greek lute is referred as *Yunanli lavta*⁶ or in the period of its existence (e.g. the lute of renaissance is referred as *Rönesans lavtası*).⁷ It is apparent that there is an etymological connection between the two terms *lavouto* and *lavta* (lav-u-ta) but it remains rather unclear which term had been used first. However, the use of the term *lafta* in Greek comes from the Turkish term *lavta* replacing the labial letter –v with the other labial letter –f. Laurence Picken in his description of an instrument in the region of West Turkey, description that might refer to Istanbul lute, uses the term *lavuta* and assumes that the term comes from the Italian term *lauta*.⁸ Finally, in Europe the instrument is called in English as *Istanbul lute* and in French *luth d' Istanbul*.

Origin and development of the instrument

The tanburi Cemil Bey (1873 – 1916) was one of the most renowned musicians and composers of the so-called "classical Ottoman music". His contribution has been significant in the development of the instrument. Studying the historical background and the development of the instrument, I believe it is necessary to divide its evolution into two periods: a) the pro Cemil Bey period and b) the after Cemil Bey period.

a) The pro Cemil Bey period

Iconographic Sources

The gravure of Thomas Allom⁹ depicts a woman who plays a type of lute very similar to *lavta*. In this gravure it is very important to notice that the arrangement of the frets (it has less

⁶ Aydemir Murat (interview, Istanbul 2011)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Picken, Laurence, *Folk musical instruments of Turkey*, Oxford University Press, London, 1975, p. 284

⁹ Thomas Allom (1804-1872) is an English architect and painter. He published an excessive number of Istanbul topographies in 1838 and 1840 entitled "*Constantinople and the Scenery of the Seven Churches of Asia Minor*" and "*Character and Costume in Turkey*" respectively. The gravure which portrays the woman playing a type of a lute is founded among this published material.

than today's lavta and their arrangement follows that of the Greek lute) and the way the woman holds the pick (the same way as the Greek lute players do, see taped material). It is also very interesting to note that in the gravure instead of seven six strings are being discerned on the headboard. Another two iconographic sources lead us to the assumption that there is a connection of the lavta with the old type of the Greek lute which existed in the Greek peninsula. The first is a J. Heynemann (France) piece of 1816 entitled *Corinthian Wedding* and the second one is a Th. Leblanc's drawing (Benaki Museum, Athens) entitled *Lute and Tambur, Greek singers* dating to the mid 19th century. Both drawings depict the old type of Greek lute (both island and mainland lutes) demonstrating an obvious similarity to lavta regarding its shape and size.¹⁰ Furthermore, the lute belonging to the collection of F. Anogianaki made in the end of 19th century (most likely by the Greek manufacturer of lutes in Istanbul Manolis Venios) is identical to lavta. In this case as well (as in the gravure of Thomas Allom) the arrangement of the movable frets is similar to the arrangement that exists in the lute known in the Greek peninsula.

The last two images illustrate clearly that the Greek lute that was used by Greeks was smaller than the lute, which prevailed in the Greek region later in the 20th century and very similar to the lavta regarding its shape and size.

Oral Sources

During my fieldwork in Istanbul I had the chance to interview two eminent researchers, writers and well known musicians living in Istanbul Mr. Fikret Karakaya (who is an instrument manufacturer as well) and Mr. Murat Aydemir. Whereas in Greece for the purpose of this paper I interviewed the musicologist and Professor at the Music Department of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Dr Ioannis Kaimakis and the lavta player and researcher Mr. Vasilis Kasouras, who lives in Thessaloniki.

Both Turkish researchers and musicians Fikret Karakaya and Murat Aydemir confirmed that in the pro Cemil Bey period this instrument was manufactured only by Greeks and Armenians of Istanbul and was played particularly by the Greeks of Istanbul. It was the instrument with which they used to accompany the civil folk songs of Istanbul. They claimed

¹⁰ The characteristics that relate the displayed instruments with the lavta are (1) the proportion of the size of the instrument to the main body of the lute players, (2) the proportion of the length of the soundboard as to the length of the instrument's neck and (3) the angled back of the pegbox. It should not be confused with the Cretan lute as it is a different type of lute according to its shape and size.

that the instrument used to have less frets than today's lavta particularly according to the Greek type of laouto.

Musician and researcher Vasilis Kasouras¹¹ agrees with the above statements and in addition he argues that this instrument was played mostly by women (the shape of the instrument, its relatively small soundboard, made it more convenient for women to hold it). This argument is also being confirmed by the gravure of Thomas Allom. Yet, the instrument has been witnessed in the 20th century as well. Prof. Dr Ioannis Kaimakis claims that he has seen this type of instrument at the island of Sifnos in Cyclades in 1977. It was a small lute with similar characteristics to the lavta regarding the shape and size of the instrument. The owner of this instrument had stated that he had bought it from Istanbul. Its neck was divided into semitones.

Thus, in accordance with the aforementioned oral sources during the pro Cemil Bey period, the lavta is identical to the old type Greek lute since all descriptions and evidence show that the instrument, namely the lavta that existed in Istanbul, had the same shape, size and arrangement of the frets.

References in written sources

The view that these two instruments, namely the lavta and the Greek laouto were actually the same instrument is also supported by Walter Feldman and Harold Agopian. More specifically, W. Feldman writes: *(the lauta) is a smaller version of the laouto played on the Greek islands.*¹² While H. Agopian supports that: *lavta is the Turkish name for a Greek laouto, a small lute of Byzantine origin and a central instrument in the modern folk music of the Greek islands, as well as Crete, Thessaly, Epirus, Thrace and Macedonia.*¹³ The aforementioned references identify the lavta with the Greek laouto even adding that the instrument is of Byzantine origin as well.

b) the after Cemil Bey period

¹¹ Dr Ioannis Kaimakis is Associate Professor of the Music Department of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

¹² Feldman, Walter, *Music of the Ottoman Court: Makam, Composition and the Early Ottoman Instrumental Repertoire*, Berlin, VWB, 1996, p.133

¹³ Agopian, Harold, *Tanburi Cemil Bey Vols. IV & V*, Traditional Crossroads, 2003

In the late 19th century, the instrument radically changes in terms of its form and the role that played in the music life of Istanbul. These changes are mainly attributed to tanburi Cemil Bey. According to Murat Aydemir και Fikret Karakaya, Cemil Bey changed the arrangement of the movable frets of the instrument. The new arrangement followed the style of the frets of the tanbur. From now on the instrument could produce semitones according to the Turkish musical system (makam). One can confirm this by listening to the recordings of Cemil Bey playing the renewed lavta himself.

The addition of more frets to the lavta and the involvement of the already esteemed and recognized musician Cemil Bey with the instrument brought major changes to the status of lavta and the role that it played in the musical scene of that period. The instrument was introduced to the orchestras of classical Ottoman music signaling the alteration of its repertoire at the same time. After 1920 and the death of Cemil Bey the instrument remained present in Istanbul. Public radio contributed to the preservation of the instrument after Cemil Bey by broadcasting all the old recordings of lavta until the 1970's.¹⁴ However, lavta never played a major role in the Turkish Classical Music like the ud did. In addition, during my fieldwork I was not able to spot any Greek of Istanbul who would play the lavta after the 1920's.

From the middle until the end of the 20th century the instrument is in decline. Nevertheless, in the last two decades the interest of Greeks and Turks for the instrument has been revived (tape recordings of Kasouras and Aydemir).

Conclusions

The present paper was an attempt to give some answers regarding the origins and development of lavta mainly through iconographic sources and oral statements. Today's lavta is the result of the changes made by the important Turkish musician tanburi Cemil Bey by the end of the 19th century. These changes concerned the arrangement of the frets on the neck of the instrument. The addition of more frets and the involvement of the prominent musician Cemil Bey with the lavta brought changes to the status of the instrument in Istanbul during the 20th century. The instrument was used in orchestras that played Ottoman Classical Music and

¹⁴ Elias, Nikolas, *Memoire de Master 2, Lavta, etude pour un luth d' Istanbul*, Universite Paul Valery, Montpellier, 2008

became an instrument that inspired both audiences and musicians and upon which new compositions of Ottoman Classical Music were written.

Researching the history and origins of the instrument before the changes that Cemil Bey brought to it, the affiliation of lavta with the old type of Greek lute was noted. Iconographic evidence clearly shows the similarities of both instruments namely the lavta and the island or mainland Greek lute. The shape and size of the instrument as well as the division of the arm in half-notes demonstrate that it is the same instrument. This argument is also confirmed by the interviews I conducted with the Turkish and Greek researchers. However, whether this instrument, which existed in the islands of the Aegean, in Mainland Greece, Asia Minor and Istanbul is a relic of the Byzantine pear-shaped lute,¹⁵ cannot be elaborated in this short paper and certainly it remains an important issue that musicologists need to research further.

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¹⁵ This term was used by Nikos Maliaras in his book “*Vizantina Mousika Organa*” (Byzantine Instruments). In the book there are some pictures portraying the Byzantine lute. However, in the second volume of the book which is expected to come out soon with great interest, instruments of the lute family will be thoroughly presented.

INTERVIEWS

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Kaimakis Ioannis, Thessaloniki, 2011

Kasouras Vasilis, Thessaloniki, 2010

