

Imagining Homeland: Identity and Repertoires of a Greek Labour-immigrant Musician in Germany

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Abstract: Migration has always played an important and determinative role in the formation of the Greek life-cycle, since the existence of a Greek Diaspora originates back to the institution of the Greek nation. However, whether the migration phenomenon represents a typical and integral part of the Greek cultural tradition or mentality, or appears as a forced consequence of specific economic or political circumstances, it should be pointed out that it has proved to be a transformative factor for the lives of people involved in it. The fate of "metanastes" (immigrants) and the life in "xenitia" (foreign host land) appear to be a very common and prominent topic elaborated in the poetic texts of the Greek "dimotika tragoudia" (traditional songs) and "laika tragoudia" (folk-popular songs).

Through these repertoires, music reveals its power in conveying and symbolically communicating and expressing public notions, feelings and cultural messages that acquire a particular significance for immigrant communities. Furthermore, diasporic music—along with dance—constitutes one of the basic components of the immigrant's cultural heritage, representing: an expressive way of maintaining cultural identity; a fixed, however metaphorical, conjunctive link between the mother country and the host land; and, a fundamental context through which the migratory community identifies or reconstitutes itself in relation to the majority and other surrounding groups.

The author uses fieldwork from a year spent amongst Greek immigrant communities in the Stuttgart region of Germany to address and reflect on issues around the role of music in identity construction and the way in which this connects with processes of integration, assimilation and transnationalism. Specifically, the paper explores the multiple identities and repertoires of a Greek musician in Germany, by focusing on several aspects of the musician's life-portrait and providing both emic and etic interpretations. This single case study is used to highlight broader relations between migration, settlement and minority-majority identity dynamics.

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1. Introduction

This paper is based upon data collected for a PhD dissertation in Ethnomusicology, entitled "Music and Musical life of the Greek Diaspora in Germany".¹ The aim of the research is to explore the representation and ethnographic interpretation of the musical-cultural identity and the musical life of the Greek Diaspora in Germany, with special focus on the Greek minority² communities spread within the broad region of Stuttgart. [1]

The first year of fieldwork among the Greek diasporic immigrant communities living in and around Stuttgart, led me to reflect on certain issues concerning the role of music in identity construction within the frame of dynamic processes of: change, syncretism, remodelling, revaluation, transmission, preservation and corruption (NETTL, 1996). The above mentioned dimensions, which are emblematic in their conception, tend to indicate strongly musical cultures focused on mobility and especially diasporic music. [2]

This paper explores the *multiple identities and repertoires of a Greek musician* named Aristoteles KONSTADINIDIS *during the first years of his settlement in Germany*, by referring to several aspects of his [life-story](#). By mainly focussing on certain fragments of this musician's colourful narratives, I will highlight the subjective meanings generated through KONSTADINIDIS' specific cultural experiences and use this to illustrate the transformative power of migration in the construction, formation and identification of identity. KONSTADINIDIS' individual musical portrait suggests a particular ethnographic paradigm which reflects how many Greek labour immigrants to Germany felt during their first steps in the new country, it also reflects the actions of an amateur musician serving a particular ethno-cultural niche. Thus, from this individual's biography, the paper will illuminate Greek immigrants' communal cultural-musical identity and provide evidence on the role of, often romanticised music, in emic and etic terms. [3]

1 This data comprises of audio-visual material, field-notes as well as interviews, all collected during fieldwork among members of the Greek community in Stuttgart, Germany. Through observing, participating ("participant observation") and looking deep into the cultural activities (concerts, special festivities, together-gatherings etc.) and the social life of these people, I was able to research the formations shaping the Greek community's daily life. Research was facilitated through links with various Greek associations, particularly the Greek Orthodox Church's cultural unions, and through personal contacts with Greek musicians.

2 According to the definition that has been suggested and agreed at the 35th ICTM (International Council for Traditional Music) World Conference in Hiroshima in 1999, "minorities" are identified as "groups of people distinguished from the dominant group out of cultural, ethnic, social, religious or economic reasons" (HEMETEK, 2001, p.21).

2. Historical Orientations: The Greek Immigration to Germany

The "Greek Diaspora" in Germany originated from the mass "labour-immigrant"³ Greek movement" that emerged after the Second World War due to a combination of the precarious economic and political conditions in Greece (leading to civil war) and the economic miracle in Germany. The massive labour movement to Germany⁴ began formally in March 1960 when Greece and Germany signed a contract⁵ for the employment of Greek workforce within the German territory. The Greek migrant community that took up employment was part of a much broader labour exchange system involving Turks, Italians, and Yugoslavians (POLM, 1995, pp.67-68). [4]

Until 1973, when the working contract system between Germany and Greece was terminated, more than 400,000 Greek labour-immigrants entered West Germany, the majority of them coming from the poorest regions of northern Greece, namely from Epirus, Macedonia and Thrace (POLM, 1995, p.75). These people settled in urban industrial areas and built substantial communities, the largest being in the region of Munich (about 25,000), followed by the broad periphery of Stuttgart (about 17,000) and Düsseldorf (about 12,000). [5]

According to the last official statistics from 2000 (VENEMA & GRIMM, 2002), over 365,000 people claim single or multiple Greek nationality in Germany, a number that is rising due to the large increase in Greek students in Germany and partly as a consequence of the reduction of formal and informal mobility barriers within the EU. Within Baden Württemberg state, the area where I conduct my fieldwork, Greeks had settled mainly in Stuttgart (about 17,000) and Ludwigsburg (about 9,000), with modest communities in Heilbronn (about 2,000) and other smaller cities (<http://www.isoplan.de/aid/2002-3/k2002-3.pdf>). [6]

In the first years of their resettlement to the new country, much of the Greek immigrant life in Germany centred around the Greek Orthodox Church, which in addition to being a place of worship, extended its role to providing a communal

- 3 In the German language and literature, the English term "labour-immigrant" had been affiliated at the end of the 1950s/beginning of the 1960s decades with the term "Gastarbeiter" (= guest worker). On the course of the time, the above mentioned German term began to acquire a negative meaning implying an explicit segregation between the majority-dominant group (Germans) and the minorities "guest workers". As long as the allocution "Gastarbeiter" possessed an underestimated denotation, it was soon withdrawn from the official language and replaced by the term "Arbeitsmigrant" (= labour-immigrant). This alternation in the German terminology was also necessitated due to the fact that the "first generation" of immigrant workers, together with their families ("second generation"), had squarely settled down in Germany and therefore considered this country as their second homeland (c.f. POLM, 1995, p.9, p.12 and p.68).
- 4 Germany is only one of the major lands which embraced and hosted the Greek labour-migratory waves. By that time had already taken place a huge transatlantic movement of Greeks—which extended from 1880 till the first three decades of the 20th century—with main final destinations being America and Australia. More than four millions of Greeks live outside their homeland's borders, in particular in numbers: in the USA: 2,600,000, in Canada: 500,000, in Australia: 450,000, in Germany: 400,000, in the former Soviet Union: 500,000, and finally in South Africa: 100,000 (SKARPELIS-SPERK, 2000).
- 5 This contract was labelled in German language as the "Vereinbarung zwischen der Regierung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der Regierung des Königreichs Griechenland über die Anwerbung und Vermittlung von griechischen Arbeitnehmern nach der Bundesrepublik Deutschland" (MÜLLER-BALLIN, 1996, p.13).

place for social—cultural interaction and occasional festivities. These helped to maintain Greek culture and reaffirmed Greek identity amongst participants. Similar to the above locales were the "Greek Schools for Mother Language and Culture" which operate as parallel and supplemental educational institutions to the German ones. There were also a few Greek state schools, whose operation and curriculum was conditioned and governed exclusively by the Greek Ministry of Education. Primarily organised by the church, Greek language schools taught the language and culture of Greece to immigrant children, whose parents wanted them to maintain their Greek culture (POLM, 1995, pp.75-77). Moreover, church-related celebrations and festivities were occasions for the Greek minority to participate in the music and dance of its homeland. [7]

A key impetus behind the above was undoubtedly the tendency for Greeks to settle in communities similar to those from their homeland. Approximately 150 of these "Greek communities" exist in Germany attracting in the region of about 60,000 members (SKARPELIS-SPERK, 2000). Greek immigrants also built regional associations with membership composed of people from a particular region or island group. In addition to providing financial support and insurance for their members, these organisations often sponsored dances and festivals, creating another way for the Greek-German community to reaffirm their Greek identity and heritage and to struggle for their cultural survival. [8]

3. Greek Musical-cultural Identities in Germany: Aristoteles KONSTADINIDIS and the "Imaginary" Greece

Aristoteles KONSTADINIDIS was born in 1945 in Hersos—a village in the highlands of Kilkis in West Makedonia, Greece—a region which was settled in the decade of 1920s by Greek refugees coming from Pontus, Black Sea. He was just one among over 400,000 Greeks who moved to Western Germany in the 1960s and 1970s in an attempt to find employment and an improved standard of living. Forced by the struggling economic circumstances emerging in Greece, and attracted by the myth of the "promised land" or "land of opportunity", KONSTADINIDIS inhabits a special place in the long and musically-infused history of the Mediterranean Diaspora. According to Philip BOHLMAN this history involves a "persistent" historical and mythical "framework for musicians to ascribe identity and place" by "establishing new communities and mapping out new cultural landscapes in promised lands, whenever, that is, promised lands are discovered or constructed" (BOHLMANN 1996, EOL 3). [9]

Music from their homeland accompanied Aristoteles KONSTADINIDIS and Greek immigrants throughout their long journey to Germany, and moreover, it became an integral part of their everyday life after their resettlement in the new land. KONSTADINIDIS' words clearly reflect this:

"The begging is the half of everything'. Before me, many of my compatriots had already tried to find their way by immigrating abroad. A suitcase and my beloved *lyra* were my only baggage. Inside the case of my string instrument there was enough space to place the necessary equipment and the spare parts of my *lyra*: many strings, two

bows, resin, a nail-clipper, a cloth and a thick notebook. My notebook was full written and included a collection of the best *Greek songs*, carefully compiled, most of them *traditional from Pontus* ... but there were also those *contemporary folk songs* ... you know these *famous songs of migrancy* [της ξενιτιάς], *songs for our homeland* and *love songs*... These were compositions of skilful and rememberable Greek artists ... they were the life itself with all the characteristics deriving from it ... the joyfulness, the sadness, the smile and the tears ... all of them with enviable and expressive verses and musical lines. While performed these songs, you could listen to the sweet bows and the fresh and fascinating voices of our eternal folk and traditional artists ...

We departed by ship from the port of Patras (Greece) on Tuesday 6th June 1972 at 22:30 with destination the port of Brindisi in Italy. In Brindisi we boarded in the train which took us to our final destination, the Central Railway Station of Munich. During our exhaustive two-day trip I played several times my lyra and I sang familiar songs, trying to give some pleasure to my *Greek fellow travelers and compatriots*, who could not even try to hold their tears full of emotion while listening the *bitter songs of migrancy* ...".⁶ [10]

KONSTADINIDIS' lyra playing connects with the traditions of his parents' original homeland of Greek Pontus; an area that for him constitutes a fundamental metaphorical link between the mother and the host land. The emphasis is on the hopefulness of the fellow traveller as he/ she moves toward new realities: Greek immigrants may not have had much in their backpacks, but they did carry with them audio cassettes and memories of music from home. [11]

The above condition is clearly illustrated in the concept presented by Adelaida REYES:

"The third proposition—that immigrants carry with them and within themselves traditions that shape or condition the way they reconstruct their lives in resettlement—refers to the cultural capital that migrants arrive with as they enter into a relationship with a host or majority society. This capital—the migrants' language, verbal and musical, their customs and their traditions—along with other forms of capital such as material goods, become the building blocks out of which a new sociocultural life and a new identity is constructed" (REYES, 2001, p.38). [12]

Through formal and informal talks and interviews with Aristoteles KONSTADINIDIS and other first generation Greek musicians in Germany, I was able to explore the social and cultural realm to which these people belonged. Their narratives show that in the first years of their settlement, music involving intimate gatherings within a strictly Greek ethnically based community setting is extremely important. [13]

Of course I would not persist in viewing music of the first generation Greek immigrants in Germany as an unmediated and uncontroversial traditional-folk sound shared by the entire community, nor do I intend to uncritically adopt the sometimes unconscious nostalgia of my informants that often communicates a

6 Aristoteles KONSTADINIDIS, interview by author, Esslingen, 24.01.2005.

sense of romantically cohesive community that preserves and reproduces only Greek authentic music. [14]

As Ruth GLASSER states in her book on "Puerto Rican Musicians and their New York Communities 1917-1940":

"Historians now acknowledge the multifaceted and ever-evolving economic, social, and political reasons for immigrant and migrant movements ... They do not try to find out whether the variety of regional, class, political, religious and other backgrounds of ethnics from the same national entity might affect their perceptions of national identity or their constructions and use of forms of cultural expression such as music" (GLASSER, 1995, p.5). [15]

However, it seems possible and it is also documented through numerous literature sources⁷ that at least the first Greek immigrant communities in Germany were very inner-ethnic oriented with a high degree of concentration and a reluctance to come in to contact with Germans or other ethnic groups. [16]

Within such an isolationist environment, the first years of Greek immigration to Germany involved little cultural exchange. This helps to explain the affirmation of a national pan-Hellenic cultural identity and an inner-ethnic unity, but also the persistence of more subtle sub-national divides. [17]

As becomes obvious through Aristoteles KONSTADINIDIS' narratives, his main concern during the first period was to associate with Greeks and in particular with people who had the same origin as him, namely Greeks from Pontus:

"... In Munich I worked in a factory as an engineer ... All that time I was alone, actually I had a company, my sister *HOPE!!!* HOPE would love me as a brother and I would adore her ... (laughing) ... but realistic speaking, I had my *Greek colleagues at work* and when I was returning back 'home' I had my lyra. You know, without my instrument there would be no life for me in German ... During my staying in Munich, I heard a lot of times my compatriots talking about a *union for Greeks from Pontus*, but I didn't manage to get there and meet with other beloved compatriots ... On 31st of August 1973 I moved to another state of Germany, in the state of Baden Württemberg and specifically in the *region of Stuttgart*, in the city of *Esslingen*. Here the situation differences a lot from the one in Munich ... there were *so many Greeks* here, that it was really hard to learn even basic German ... you needed to take private lessons, to make a lot of effort ... In 1975 there was none society for *Greeks from Pontus* within the region, however people would make thoughts of establishing such a union and many of them would move forward to this ... In the first month of my arriving in Esslingen, *I formed a music group with other compatriots* who had been there previously and had established already good contacts with the *Greek community* ... a group performing *folk-popular songs* and *music from Pontus*. The name of this first music group that I participated in Germany was '*Oi Prosfyges*' [The Refugees]. We performed at any occasion, at any communal event, given for

⁷ Related works in: BENEKOS (2002), DELIDEMETRIOU-TSAKMAKI (2001), IRMSCHER (1989), KOLODNY (1985), LAJOS (1993), and MÜLLER-BALLIN (1996).

example marriages, engagements, dances and festivities organized by the *Greek communities*".⁸ [18]

Even the choice and appropriation of the name "Oi Prosfyges" (The Refugees) for the first ensemble in which KONSTADINIDIS participated in as a lyra player seems significant in this context: the members of the group were all descendants from Pontus and had been forged in the most profound way by their ancestor's cultural traits, particularly in terms of the derivation of identity through music. Although they themselves had not been refugees, they found this name appropriate for the new world of realities that they had to confront. [19]

If I attempt to conceptualise the above remarks, trying to apply their implications in the construction of a Greek musical identity of the first years in Germany, I would follow Max-Peter BAUMANN's dynamic models of "mental construct" and "cultural concepts" which determine different notions of cultural change within multicultural societies:

"The individual musician, the individual music group, the listener, culture promoters etc. confronts his own experiences, the image of the 'other'. He reacts to the 'other', to the 'stranger' either (1.) negatively closed, (2.) selectively choosing what he likes, (3.) fully open. In the case of rejecting behavior, an excessive return to the own cultural values and patterns of behavior can result, which can also often lead to ghettoization or to isolation. The own value are reinterpreted. In the case of too open behavior towards the foreign cultural power, this can lead to a dissolving of the original own culture" (BAUMANN, 1995, p.19). [20]

And yet departing from this statement, I would argue that the "negatively closed" attitude of the first Greek immigrants towards the new realities and the cultural "other" would possibly have derived from an ethnocentric monologue reproduced within their communities. This position is clearly illustrated in the following words:

"The romantic concept of ethnically centered action on the basis of the Local can be designated 'the traditional cultural concept', which derives from the 19th century (the "traditional village" as the home of one's central values) This is marked in an essentialist way by ethnocentric and national perspectives" (BAUMANN, 2000, p.128). [21]

However, a closer and more careful look at the special circumstances under which Greek migration emerged, would be helpful in explaining some of the above mentioned statements. [22]

In the thirteen years from 1960 to 1973 Greek labour-immigration to Germany increased dramatically. In the first decade alone around 400,000 Greeks were recorded as entering the country. With such large numbers arriving, Greeks quickly established a pattern of forming ethnic communities in various places

8 Aristoteles KONSTADINIDIS, interview by author, Esslingen, 09.02.2005

throughout the former Republic of Germany with the most modest "colonies" appearing in Munich, Stuttgart, Köln, Düsseldorf (POLM, 1995, pp.67-68). [23]

In our case it is important to note that the vast majority of Greek immigrants came from the rural and more economically weak regions of Greece. When Greek immigrants came to Germany, they often settled in areas where they knew others—often family members and more distant relatives—and/or quickly found those with whom they shared regional or even village-based customs. [24]

For a variety of geographical, social, and political reasons, Greece from its inception has been exceedingly provincial. Greeks consider their regional background and identity as extremely significant. They are Thracians, Macedonians, Epirotes, Greeks from Pontus, Cretans etc., and this is of primary importance with the label of "Greek" being only secondary. Like Aristoteles KONSTADINIDIS, most of the Greek musicians who migrated to West Germany in the 60's came from rural areas and had been amateur musicians. They had inherited oral traditions which reflected regional styles and, exactly because of this peculiarity of multiple regional identities, the first Greek immigrants to Germany considered their regional background and identity as of primary importance. Each regional group sponsored its own fraternal society and participated in its own social activities. As a consequence the first Greek musical ensembles formed in Germany were regional, both in personnel, formation and repertoire. A group of Greeks from Pontus, for example, such as "The Refugees" would perform mainly music from Pontus and participate more often than not in Thracian get-togethers. [25]

However, the change from a rural (Greek agricultural or range village) to an urban (German industrial city) environment created a need for rapid adaptation to ensure survival. The new "survival tactics" that soon emerged marked a shift away from Greek regional identities to a broader pan-Hellenic identity. This adaptation can be traced through the Greek musical landscape in Germany. On the one hand, the enclaves of Greek regional musical groups were small in number and on the other hand the continuation of social life and festivities depended on a sufficient number of community participants to maintain them. This reality required a cultural exchange among the various Greek regional groups that was often very controversial. Similarly, the Greek regional musicians were soon unable to remain self-sufficient, and the musical ensembles acquired a national Greek multiregional identity in order to survive. The musical transformation into a broader Greek musical identity through the amalgamation of different regional influences was also reflected in KONSTADINIDIS' own career:

"Since then, I have been playing my lyra with *many music groups* such as '*I Parea*' [The Company], with *musicians coming from other parts of Greece* ... Together with them I *learned to play music from other regions of Greece*, music that I had never played before ...".⁹ [26]

9 Aristoteles KONSTADINIDIS, interview by author, Esslingen, 09.02.2005.

In Germany, he came across and established bands with Greeks coming from all regions of Greece and at the same time he was exposed, familiarised and challenged to perform distinctive and unique Greek regional musical repertoires, apart from his own familiar one. The name "I Parea" (The Company) which was assigned to the next ensemble in which KONSTADINIDIS participated as a lyra player clearly exemplifies the re-evaluation of the traditional fraternal values and marks the first steps of the inner-ethnic integration process which occurred among the members of the Greek diasporic community in Germany. In summarising the above points, I would like to end by noting Tullia MAGRINI's concept of diasporic musical language, namely that: "the musical language of diasporas' seems to be a flexible language which is chosen and re-built on the basis of specific needs and circumstances" (MAGRINI, 1996, EOL 3). [27]

4. Conclusion

The paper has shown how, through a discussion of Aristoteles KONSTADINIDIS' life-history, musical behaviour, experience, and practice is part of an unfolding and dynamic process of adaptation. In KONSTADINIDIS' own words:

"Our aim as musicians abroad was this one and only: We wanted to serve all our compatriots who were away from homeland to be in contact with our music and dances, with our valuable tradition. We undertook this task both as commitment and necessity... we felt our selves being social actors and as well as servants of our Greek Mouse".¹⁰ [28]

Thus, beyond being just a performer of his homeland's traditional music, KONSTADINIDIS is first and foremost an individual social-cultural actor who, through his musical activity, serves as a mediator between the host country (Germany) and the homeland (Greece). [29]

It is clear from this that the music and life-histories of musicians such as Aristoteles KONSTADINIDIS and groups such as "The Refugees" and "I Parea"—beyond their anonymity and simplicity—become fascinating in their own right. They concern people who undertake the task of transmitting and maintain their homeland's cultural values by performing music within a context of massive displacement and emigration. Both as labour migrants and as cultural intermediaries, of the past, present (and future?) migrant musicians deserve to be recognised, chronicled and celebrated the world over. [30]

10 Aristoteles KONSTADINIDIS, interview by author, Esslingen, 30.01.2005.

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