



*Voice, clarinet and lute in Sakellariko, Epirus.*

## FOLK SINGING IN EPIRUS

*Joshua Barley*

*travels from Athens to the border of Albania in search of the haunting song of Epirus*

When I lived in Athens, on occasion I would attend lectures at the National And Kapodistrian University – an enormous, dystopian building on the lower slopes of Mount Hymettus, resembling more than anything a multi-storey car park. The hideousness of the construction is abetted by the spirit of comradeship that reigns within, by the hawks nesting in the upper levels and by the snow-capped mountains of the Peloponnese, appearing on stark spring mornings out of the west-facing windows. This was the incongruous arena for my first forays into the study of Greek folk culture. Each lecture was a three-hour meandering solo performed by the genial, indefatigable musicologist Lambros Liavas.

‘Traditional music’, he began one morning, ‘is a flowing stream’. He was given to aphorism. ‘Folkloric music’, he went on, ‘is bottled water. And ethnic music ... ethnic music is a bottle of Coca Cola.’ The metaphors continued unstemmed, with virtuosic skill. ‘Tradition is a fruit plucked from the tree. Folklore is a pot of jam. And ethnic ...’, he paused for thought, before glancing at me, ‘Ethnic is one of those strange chutneys [which is rendered *τσάρνει* in Greek] that the English eat with their meat.’

Epirus, the most northwesterly province of Greece, on the border with Albania, is full of flowing streams. It is the land of the Acheron, Cocytus, Thyamis and Arachthus rivers, whose roaring cataracts

tumble through the limestone landscape just as the syllables of their names roll around the enamel of the teeth. They lead you inexorably towards Hades, just as they did Odysseus, guided by Circe, who on his black ship reached the shores of Epirus and entered the Underworld where the Acheron and Cocytus meet. This was the land of the Cimmerians, wrapped in cloud and mist, a land the sun never reached.

And so it is today, with mists enfolding mountains and mountains enfolding steep-alleyed villages, home to a stereotypically proud and reserved people. In winter, the wind strips the skin down to the bone and old men, collars up, sit framed in the windows of cafés. In the summer, with the population swelled by Athenians returning to their

hometown, the squares are flooded with people and the villages come alive with the smell of roasting lamb and the sounds of festivities. It is, in a sense, both the most and least 'Greek' province of the country: least, because this is a far cry from the sun-washed Aegean landscape of the imagination; most, because it lays claim to be the cradle of the 'Hellenes' themselves, who first lived around the Oracle of Dodona and whose name derives from the adjacent Helopian plain.

The rivers that flow south reach either Odysseus' entrance to Hades or, further south, the Ambracian gulf, site of the Battle of Actium. The large river that flows north – the Aoös – crosses the border to Albania, changes its name to Vjöse and empties into the Ionian Sea near the Gulf of Oricum, the most north-westerly port of call of the *Argo* and the natural northern limit of Epirus. Greek-speaking villages still exist north of the Greek-Albanian border, just as Albanian ones do (though

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fewer) to the south. Consequently, 'Northern Epirus' has been claimed as Greek by the nationalists, just as 'Southern Albania' or even 'Illyria' has been claimed by their Albanian counterparts. Indeed, the mountains, rivers and mists do not stop at the border. Leaving aside the nationalist bores, this land is one land, inhabited by Greeks, Albanians and Vlachs alike. And let us call it all Epirus, since that, after all, is what it was called by Pyrrhus, cousin of Alexander the Great and the region's most famous unifier.

More than mountains, mists and King Pyrrhus, Epirus is united by other, man-made elements. The music is ostensibly defined by the clarinet, played with a singular technique, which derives from the shepherd's pipe or the *karamuza*. It produces an idiosyncratic effect – a melancholy wail, full of trills, glissandi and a gargling-like leaping between notes known as a *ta-ach-ta*, where the 'ach' usually falls on a particularly jarring note, such as the minor seventh.

I had been totally captivated by this music ever since I first heard it on a balmy July evening in the town of Yannina, capital of Epirus. As a full moon rose over the lake, the leaping clarinet opened some dark chamber deep in the pit of the stomach, full of vaguely remembered sorrows, out of which jumped an animal that lodged itself in the larynx. Somewhere a woman had lost her son. This is the music of the lurching heart and the frog in the throat.



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*Mountains of Suli, Epirus.*

‘Ach’ gargles the clarinet, ‘Ach’ gargles the Acheron and Acheloos and the heart aches – yes, there is something melancholy lingering in the waters of Epirus. And you hear it first in the clarinet. And if you go to one of the festivals, the *panigyria*, you hear it most strongly in the opening tune, which is known as a *miroloy* or ‘lament’. This is the same term, meaning ‘words of fate’ (*moirologoi*), that is used for laments for the dead – that spontaneous outpouring of poetry, equally famous in Epirus as in the Mani (where they may be known to the reader from Patrick Leigh Fermor’s book *Mani*). Here, in its instrumental development, the clarinet leaps and wails more than ever. There is no dancing, unlike all other instrumental music in Greece. It is said that this style of piece is played to commemorate the year’s dead, or those gone abroad (a fate of equal, if not greater tragedy). As in the poetry, there is here a sense of catharsis, a kind of resolution to life’s hardships – which, in this forbidding environment, were and are many – brought about by the musical enactment of irresolvable and illogical grief. That Epirote celebrations should start on such a note of mourning may come as a surprise to some, but not to those who know the delicate balance between joy and sorrow, life and death, in these parts.

Back in Lambros Liavas’ classroom I had heard an apposite expression of this strange combination of joy and sorrow in a folk song from Epirus – *Alismono kai chairomai*, ‘Alas I say and I rejoice’ – about the bittersweet departure from home. ‘I remembered foreign lands and I want to go.’ But it was not so much the words that stopped me in my tracks or yanked at my metaphorical ponytail, as the way of singing. A lone male voice delivered the first line – a simple, solid melody of the kind that could be played with just the black notes of the piano – before being interrupted by another voice, part the coo of a wood pigeon, part

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an Alpine yodel and part the Greek ‘Ach’ of woe. Just like the ‘Ach’ of the clarinet, it touched a painful note, just below the root of the melody (the minor seventh or sub-tonic). It came in and out like an ache. Other voices now entered, intoning a drone on a low octave of the root note, set off by a repetition of the initial melody and the cooing of the second singer. The chorus swelled, the tension built up to a jarring climax until, bearable no more, it was cut off by an unseen hand bringing thumb to index finger. The cycle started again, with new words. The whole effect was unearthly and somehow primitive. Certainly not ‘Greek’ as I knew it – nor answering to any broad-brush term like ‘Western’ or ‘Eastern’. Its harmony seemed more appropriate to a group of fishermen on the Yangtze or some chain gang in the Mississippi delta. What was this strange bird singing from the mountains of Epirus?

Research cleared the mists somewhat. This polyphonic singing is the only one of its kind in Greece (elsewhere, folk song is monophonic – i.e. one melody with no harmonic counterpoint), sung all over Epirus as much by Albanians and Vlachs as by Greeks (with minor variations). It is made up fundamentally of three parts – the ‘taker’ (*partis*), who intones the melody, the ‘spinner’ or ‘turner’ (*klostis* or *yiristis*), who provides the jarring harmony, and the *isokrates* (drones). The *klostis* is described as ‘cutting’ the melody of the *partis* when it hits the minor seventh or sub-tonic (a *kopsimo*), just as a second clarinet or violin would do in a company of instrumentalists. All imagery points to threads and weaving. It seems as though at least the *klostis* used to be a woman

(now it tends to be a man, though he often uses falsetto), and originally the whole group might well have been women. The songs are again called *miroloyia*, even though they are rarely laments for the dead, and their mournful character lies in that painful, ‘cutting’ note of the *klostis* – usually the minor seventh, the eternal note of pain. Instinctively, it seemed that it was *this* singing that the clarinets were imitating with their own trilling on the minor seventh – their own ‘Ach’. An idea of a particularly Epirote harmony was forming in my mind – a primitive one, based around the clash of tonic and sub-tonic.

If this idiosyncratic style of clarinet playing can be traced back to the vocal *miroloyia*, I thought, what can be said of their own origin? Hellenes and philhellenes alike are ever inclined to trace an unbroken stream of tradition back to ancient Greece, and folk culture has long been thought to be the medium of this link from past to present. The polyphonic song is ripe for such an approach. Surely, it is argued, we can see the traces of the ‘Dorians’ in the primeval, pentatonic melodies of the polyphonic song?

I have already mentioned Epirus’ claim to be the cradle of the Hellenic race, and enthusiasts love to find traces of ancient customs among these people of the mountains. Could the polyphonic song not also derive from those early Greeks around Dodona? Some even see the very image of the tragic chorus in the melancholic group of singers. And if not ancient Greece, eyes turn to Byzantium.

The drone and the harmony certainly sound rather like the kind of chanting one finds in the Orthodox Church. Others look for its origins in the landscape itself, with the hard, pentatonic melodies being at home in a stark, mountainous place, and the inspiration for polyphony arising from the multiple tinkling of sheep and goat bells. All these ideas were appealing, but all, of course, equally unprovable. Still, I had an idea of my own.



Gjirokastër.

***‘Its harmony seemed more appropriate to a group of fishermen on the Yangtze or some chain gang in the Mississippi delta’***

It was autumn when I set out to find the polyphonic song in situ. On the long October afternoons I followed flocks of sheep out to pasture and, lying among the clover, heard the first intimations of the song, when a hundred restless mouths set to work on the vegetation. Offset by their bells, this drone almost was reminiscent of what I had heard in that classroom in Athens. But of human voices I heard little. The villages of Greek Epirus, just like much of Greece, are aching empty outside the summer. This is particularly true of the rich ones, prettified for a few weeks’ summer residence. The same fate, so to speak, has afflicted the polyphonic song. It is a summer visitor to these parts, a

collector’s item, a museum piece wheeled out as a memory of tradition. Folklore. Bottled water.

In the poorer, more ramshackle villages of Pogoni, right on the border of Albania, where slightly less wealth and emptiness reigned, it was equally difficult to find. I would be directed to the local intellectual, the kind of amateur folklorist-polymath who has invariably made his own *raki*, wine and honey, and written a few tomes on the history of his home village. He is excellent company but he cannot sing the *miroloyia*, nor gather together the people who can, nor find the man who can gather the people who can. There are some, undoubtedly, but they are scattered and unwilling. Better to come in the summer and see a touring group, or go to the annual polyphonic festival in Athens.

Travelling further north into Albanian Epirus (if I may be so bold as to call it that), the scenery remained the same, the architecture remained the same, but the air was

different. You notice it first in the cars – the old Mercedes that came at the fall of the Communist dictatorship and have not been replaced. Then you see it in the villages of Dropoli that line the first plain after the border. Here the language is still Greek, but the houses, with their slate roofs, rafters, wooden doors and draughts, give an impression of what their equivalents in Greece must have been like decades ago, before the rafters were lost to ceilings and the slate roofs to tiles. The town of Gjirokastër (Argyrokastro in Greek) is the culmination of these stone-built villages, with its muscular, slate-roofed mansions in the old town. Might the stream of tradition be preserved here, along with the rafters and slate roofs?

It was late in the afternoon when I arrived in Gjirokastër, finding myself in the sprawling modern development at the bottom of the town. No sooner had I set off up the hill than I was accosted by a short

and rather ungainly man waving a small sign: 'Otel, otel', he cried, all too predictably. I was preparing to wave him away and press on, but there was something endearing about his inept sales technique and the way he had leapt up so vigorously from his *raki*, unapologetically abandoning his companion. So I humoured him and, the bill unpaid, we went to find his lodgings. With a grin he pushed open a gate of corrugated iron and ushered me into a room beneath his house. It was a sea of brightly-coloured blankets, each bed seamlessly flowing into the next in an attempt to cram as many in as possible. Lewd magazine pages fluttered about the room. He apportioned me a section of this mass of beds. I was delighted, and pressed five euros into his hand.

As my Albanian was not up to much, Tutto took me to his Greek-speaking neighbour, who owned a café. Eyeing his Albanian friend with some amusement, Sokrati motioned me to sit down. There was a power cut, and he was lighting a few candles. Evening was drawing in around the white and grey concrete of the road outside. I asked Sokrati about the polyphonic song. 'Of course', he said, 'you hear it all the time. I've got friends who can sing it. Just wait and I'll get them together.' Contented, I went back to my *raki* as he picked up his phone and began making calls. A few men dribbled into the café. With each I was expecting some *partis* to take up a melody or a *klostis* to cut it or spin it out. But no sound was heard. And then the excuses started arriving. Yorgo had lost his voice; the *klostis* – the most technically skilled member of the group – was stuck in Tepelene; the drones were on the other side of town. I seemed foiled again.

When Tutto reappeared and got wind of my demands, he displayed his usual exuberance. He knew exactly where to go, and would take me immediately, as long as I bought him a *raki*. My part of the contract made, we set off through the ill-lit

tower blocks. I could barely keep up with his pace. Around the back of a hospital, down a couple of dark alleyways we came to a neon-lit café. There were a few men around a table, drinking *raki* and picking at pieces of raw garlic, and at the bar sat a woman with unnaturally large, painted lips and a slightly too alluring smile surrounding her cigarette. Tutto conveyed my wishes.

Without a hint of bashfulness one of the men put his *raki* down and struck up a tune. From his right came that curious cooing noise. And then, with a whooshing sound that filled my heart with warmth, in came the drones. All around the room the men joined in, thrusting their jaws forward and narrowing their eyes. It was as if more and more stops were being pulled out of an organ. It swept us all up like a river. Finally, with the almost gasping sound that the organ makes when its massive chord suddenly comes to an end and the hands are violently lifted, we all cut off simultaneously. In came the *partis* again. After a few more lines, with the final chord cut off, a cheer went up, glasses were clinked and polished off.

'What was that song?' I asked. It was some narrative on the birth of the Albanian state, I was told. A far cry from a Greek *mirology*, I thought. But here, at last, seemed something that was not bottled or performed, but was, perhaps, a living, flowing stream.

Streams, it seems, move in strange and unpredictable ways. One must surely trace this Albanian polyphony to the same root as the Greek *miroloyia* – the structure and harmony is too similar for it to be otherwise. Yet this exuberant, almost macho style is a world away from a lament. Here is a divergence of the streams, where on the Albanian side of the border it has gathered momentum and rolls along as a full-bodied river. On the Greek side, just like the Platonic Ilissos, the stream has dried to an almost untraceable trickle, and survives mainly in

bottles, exhibited and ticketed. Will it flow naturally again? I see no reason why not.

And what of the streams' source? We have seen how Greek nationalist narratives can be written aplenty about its origins. Albanians, for their part, are quickly catching up with their own narratives of its Albanian roots – it was hardly surprising, I thought, that the song I heard had such a nationalist bent. The anthropologist, in turn, will no doubt find comparisons with other polyphonic traditions, such as that of Georgia. No agreement will be reached.

***'When the philhellene hears those men in the café in Gjirokastër, he will feel instinctively that this was the song that Byron, who visited Ali Pasha up the road in Tepelene, used to relish'***

As for the philhellene, intoxicating ideas come and go. The first is a memory of the club-footed standard-bearer of our race, who, in a boat on Lake Geneva, threw back his head and howled an 'Albanian song' to the bemused Shelleys. When the philhellene hears those men in the café in Gjirokastër, he will feel instinctively that *this* was the song that Byron, who visited Ali Pasha up the road in Tepelene, used to relish. It is a true expression of the fierce Albanian spirit that he so admired.

The other idea, more intoxicating, takes us further back. Despite all arguments to the contrary and in full knowledge of the futility of drawing such grand lines, the philhellene cannot help but find a thread. And into his head comes an image which he cannot quite exorcise. It is of three women spinning thread. They have been called the *moirai* or the *klothes*. One takes up the thread, one draws it out and the other cuts. Up on earth, the *partis* takes up a tune. The *klostis* cuts it. And the lament begins.



*The philhellene cannot help but find a thread. The three fates, spinning, from a 16th-century Netherlandish tapestry.*