



*Nikos with his wife, the singer Kyriaki Spanou, who comes from the island of Paros.*

‘You have to talk to Nikos — he will be your source.’

I saved up all my questions to ask him for each time we had scheduled a Skype meeting but every time we talked, I felt as if I knew less and less about the *nisiotika*. His has been a lifetime of involvement and musicianship. It is in his bones, or, as the Greeks say, in his cells. I know enough to know how lucky I am to have Nikos as my informant.

‘The Aegean,’ Nikos tells me, ‘is a huge network of musical influences — each island is unique and each is connected to the others through a common ‘code’ that goes back to Byzantine times, perhaps even earlier. The circle of the dance is what you must look at. The rhythms of five and ten that are kept alive in such dances as the *Avyeranos* are older than the twos and fours we play now. Sifnos still has dances in that rhythm of five. The music of Ikaria is very old too.’

For Nikos, every single island in the waters of the Aegean is linked to another but it’s not always clear how the pieces fit together. It is a puzzle he has spent his life untangling, a mystery that an old island violinist helped him solve. He asked the man how he determined the

beat when he started playing. ‘You watch the steps of the dancer,’ the old man said, ‘and you take your rhythm from there.’ It was a surprise, Nikos tells me. ‘You don’t set the rhythm, you watch the lead dancer and adjust your playing to him or her. Anticipate what the dancer will do. A good dancer, like a good musician, makes use of breaks in the music — *tsakismata*. When they do it well, the musician and the dancer become one.’

Dance, Nikos understood, was the key to everything: ‘The islanders all love to dance, but in the old days, they didn’t dance often — only on special occasions. They danced at the pre-Lenten carnival, at Easter, at festivals, at weddings; then they danced for hours, sometimes for days. They made it last. They remembered it. Now, with the economic crisis, people can’t afford to go out and dance whenever they want to. They wait. And then they dance more like they did in the old days. Last night I played at a celebration in a suburb of Athens. Two and a half thousand people came. And they didn’t get tired. We didn’t either. Sometimes we’ve played for ten hours. You know how people say to you, “I went to a good concert last night, but it was too long — almost three hours.” When they hear the island music and start to dance, people can dance till morning. Because this music *gives* you energy — it doesn’t take it away.’

The reason that Nikos dislikes some lugubrious modern performances of nisiotika songs like ‘I’ve Told You and I’ll Tell You Again,’ is that they treat island songs like laments instead of dances. ‘In the island tradition we understand the sadness of these songs, but we find a way to make joy from sorrow.’ If the performers don’t have the right rhythm, the right *palmos* (pulse), the songs are unbearable to Nikos. The rhythm that is so important to the musicians takes what jazz musicians might call its ‘feel’ or ‘groove’ from the dancers or in dialogue with them. All of the nisiotika are in a dance rhythm, most of them in *ballos* or *syrtos*, and never, he insists, in the 9/8 of the *zeibekiko*, despite the popularity of that rhythm on the island of Lesbos. ‘I decided, once,’ he says, laughing, ‘that they all drank too much on Lesbos and maybe that’s why they dragged the rhythms.’ Some island tunes, like ‘Thalassaki,’ can be played and danced as a *kalamatianos* — a pan-Greek dance with seven beats in a bar — but

the overall character of the dance hardly changes whether it is in seven or four; it remains a type of island syrtos and in island music it has no connection with the town of Kalamata in the Peloponnese, despite its name.

After listening to the intrinsically exotic (to the western ear) 9/8 of the zeibekiko, the principal dance of the rembetika, the duple rhythms of most island music may seem unexciting. But to an island violinist like Nikos Oikonomides, the thumping 2/4 beat of the other main rembetika dance, the *hasapiko*, as performed by a bouzouki band, is just as unexciting. In island music, the smallest deflections in rhythm or melody from the basic structure are cherished provided they adhere to a stylistic norm. Like the columns of the Parthenon, deviations from symmetry create an illusion of symmetry.

Another thing that Nikos dislikes is to see dancers swaying their hips when they dance a ballos or syrtos: 'In the nisiotika there must be austerity in the bodily gestures — the body is always erect.' As Nikos talks, I begin to see why dance is so fundamental to the instrumentalists. Its rhythm gives them a reason to play, but it must be governed by the same combination of energy and control that guides the musicians. Austerity is what is admired in every great dance form, from flamenco to Cuban dance. *Kefi*, the exuberance that drinking, music and dancing create, is important too, but if there is too much of it, the spirit of the *glendi* (celebration) can tip over into formlessness, a lack of control that destroys the occasion. Form matters in the dance, in the music, in the singing. Without it, the delicate balance of elements is destroyed.

When I ask him about harmony, Nikos tells me it is not like the Ottoman modal system of *makamia* or modes. What matters in island music is the sense of harmony provided by the drone (the *ison* of Byzantine music) that underlies each melody and can be supplied either by the violin or the laouto. Nikos is very insistent that this drone, which is not fixed but may move several times to support the melody, usually remaining a sixth below the tonic, is the most important element of the musical structure. Melodies are built on a pentachord in what would be called the first *echos* in the Byzantine system — a mode that corresponds to the D (natural) minor, 'western scale'. Another way of describing the melodies common on the islands would

be to consider them as composed of two disjunct tetrachords (say, D to G, and A to D). In any case, the melody usually focuses on the first five notes of the modal scale. Unlike the Ottoman and Byzantine musical traditions in which improvisation is attracted to the note below the tonic, in the nisiotika improvisation is attracted to the note above. The melodic phrases are often made up of a pair of four-bar phrases that are easily recognizable. As Nikos understands them, they are questions and answers. ‘The first phrase asks a question. The second phrase responds, always with a positive answer.’

It is interesting how western the scales and rhythms of most of the nisiotika are. Oriental modes occur in the music, but the islanders avoid the most common Asia Minor modes such as Hijaz, which has an interval of a tone and a half between the second and third notes of the scale. Greek island musicians call these ‘chromatic’ modes. Although Byzantine music, as it continued in the music of the Greek Orthodox Church, influenced the Greek folk tradition, Venetian and Frankish influences dominate island music, and most of it sounds familiar to western ears. Again, Nikos thinks dance is what pushed island music in a western direction. What worked best for the dancing was what remained popular.

The Aegean is filled with dances, but most fall into two groups — the syrτος and ballos, in duple metre, and other dances of the type called *sta tria* (‘in three’ because of their steps, not their metre). These can be in a slow duple metre like the *siganos* from Karpathos, or the *issos* from Kalymnos, or a fast duple metre like the quick hasapiko or the *sousta*, or the *vlaha* from Naxos. The exceptions to the duple metre are found in the islands strongly affected by Asia Minor music like Lesvos, where the  $9/4$  *karsilamas* and various types of zeibekiko are popular.

The syrτος in its various forms — kalamatianos, sousta, *ikariotikos*, *maleviziotikos* — is probably the oldest dance in the Greek repertoire. It is already mentioned in a first century Boeotian inscription and seems to have continued through the Roman and Byzantine periods to the present. Nobody knows how long islanders have been dancing something that looks like a syrτος — usually performed as an open circle dance that moves from left to right led by the first dancer in