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**Greek operetta between East and West:
the case of *Chalima***

‘Dío kósmous ékhi i psikhí mou, Dísi kai Anatolí¹

Introduction: operetta in Greece

In his comedy *Le donne de casa soa* (1755), the great Italian playwright Carlo Goldoni tried to place an invisible border between East and West. Therefore, he claimed that we can imagine a vertical line on the map from North to South that passes right over the island of Corfu and divides West from East (Chatzēpantazēs 2007: 20). Greek music found itself in the midst of such controversy after the establishment of the Greek state. And the dispute lasts until today.

Operetta is one of the genres in which the different paths between East and West are most evident. The first acquaintance of the Greek public with the genre was made through a French operetta troupe that had been invited to Athens by the Greek Royal Court in 1871. However, substantial contact with the new genre was made twelve years later, in 1883, when a touring Armenian operetta troupe presented, in the chic and cosmopolitan seaside theatre of Neo Phaliro, a dozen French and Ottoman operettas in Turkish language. Among them there was a play *Leblebidji Hor-Hor Agha* [Hor-hor the chickpea vendor] that was to become a model for a long series of similar ones, both in Greece and in the wider region of the Eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, performances of the play were not given only in the aforementioned areas, but also in Vienna, Paris, the USA, and Cairo until World War II; there have also been contemporary revivals in

¹ ‘East and West are two realms in my heart’, verse from the song *Mes sta dyo tis matia* [Inside her two eyes], lyrics by Giōrgos Gkikodimas, sung by Charis Alexiou.

Passadena, New York, Paris and Yerevan. A distant descendant of the play found its way to the West End in 1897, under the title *Yashmak, a story of the East*.

After *Leblebidji Hor-Hor Agha*, the acceptance that the genre of operetta gained in Greece was amazing. Due to the successful experiment of mixing light and art music, western and oriental tunes, while offering a spectacle that could be characterised both by cosmopolitanism and local colour, theatrical and musical entertainment, classy and popular, the genre radically changed Greek theatre.

Leblebidji Hor-Hor Agha is the third operetta in Ottoman Turkish composed by the Armenian Dikran Tchouhadjian. It was staged in November 1875, at the theatres of Peran (Mestyan 2011: 219–352 and passim). Its plot is a blend of Molière's theatre and Ottoman traditional theatre, mainly the Orta Oyunu. During the years that followed, the play was performed hundreds of times, indicating that something new had happened in the theatre and perhaps in the social life of the Ottoman Empire. This leads us to argue that the history of operetta is neither merely musical, nor solely theatrical, but also social (Seiragakēs 2012).

The interesting thing about the reception of the play in Greece is that, from its Greek premiere in Turkish in 1883, until the composition and performance of the first Greek operetta, this play not only functioned as a model for the creation of Greek vaudeville, but its music was also gradually assimilated and became inseparable from Greek traditional music. Three years after its Greek premiere, the audiences of the military band open-air concerts in Athens had noted the lack of Greek music in the repertoire of those events and persistently asked for Greek songs like *Leblebidji Hor-Hor Agha*, and a march entitled *Black is the night on the mountains* (Mparoutas 1992).

The latter was written by Andreas Scheiler, a musician of the military band whose father, also a military band musician, came to Greece when two battalions of military music followed the arrival of King Otto in the 1830s. In other words, the audience asked for these as the most representative Greek songs, although the former was a song from an Ottoman operetta and the latter a Bavarian march.

The footprint of the East remained very strong in the cultural life of Greece throughout the nineteenth century. The ultimate Greek best-selling book of the period was also a comedy with disparate songs: the famous

Babylonia had thirty editions until 1900 and the title clearly implies the coexistence of different cultures and elements in Greece during the construction of what we conventionally call ‘national identity’. The play is also an amalgam of the elements of Western and Oriental theatre, as it also has its roots in the Orta Oyunu, a traditional Ottoman genre (Solomōnidēs 1954: 184). The latter genre with its stock characters bears a strong resemblance to the Shadow Theatre, a genre which was widespread both in the Ottoman Empire and in Greece.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Greek actors felt up to attempting an operetta performance. The oriental operettas, with the advantage of familiarity, functioned as the ideal stepping stone in order to gain the audience’s applause upon the stage of a demanding genre. In 1889, the folk comedian Kostakis Kalitsis presented *Leblebidji Hor-Hor Agha* translated into Greek (Chatzēpantazēs 1981) and, in 1906, an orientalist Greek operetta following in the footsteps of *Hor-Hor Agha* appeared in Athens under the characteristic title *Pharaoh Pasha* (Seiragakēs 2009). Soon, a new adaptation of *Leblebidji Hor-Hor Agha* was used by the more significant Greek operetta troupes that had been established from 1909 onwards. The actor who made the translation, Nikos Paraskevopoulos, possessed skills that proved extremely useful: his pursuit of Shadow Theatre during his childhood and his experience of touring in Smyrna with the prose theatre troupe of Dionysios Tavoularis, where the success of *Hor-Hor Agha* forced them to use the only corresponding Greek play they had in their repertoire, *Babylonia*, which we have already mentioned.

The conscious effort to eliminate from the narrative of the birth of Greek operetta the contribution of the Eastern element is impressive. Greek scholars never refer to Greek ‘oriental’ operetta performances before the interwar period, and even the actors themselves who excelled in *Hor-Hor Agha* underestimated this success, rather considering it a necessary sacrifice to public taste. In this respect, the case of the actor Yiannis Papaioannou is characteristic, as he never included *Leblebidji Hor-Hor Agha* in the printed list of plays of his troupe’s advertising poster, although he was one of the three actors who best incarnated the old Ottoman peddler.

The case of *Chalima*

Chalima, ‘a spectacular operetta in three acts’ (a subtitle in the score), is probably the most representative example of an operetta that lies between

East and West. Its composer, Theophrastos Sakellaridēs, was born in Athens in 1883 and is regarded as the most successful Greek operetta composer, having completed more than 80 such works. He became familiar with Eastern church music through his father, who was a composer himself and a chanter in church. Even though there is no evidence of formal music education, Theophrastos claims that he studied music in Germany and Italy. His most renowned work *O Vaphtistikos* [The Godson] was written in 1918 and has been staged in Athens almost every year until today.

Chalima was first staged in Athens at the Mondial Theatre on 31 August 1926 and became an immediate success. Until World War II, it was staged more than 200 times. After World War II, however, it was staged only once, but some highlights were recorded around 1956, by the Radio Symphony Orchestra. On 15 February, 2013, *Chalima* was staged again at the Greek National Opera. For this new production, the music score was restored and edited by Ioannis Tselikas, therefore the following part of this article is an outcome of this enterprise. The full score had to be prepared from the manuscript parts of a 1928 production. The problem was that 1/3 of the parts was missing, namely the oboe, bassoon, horns, second violins and violas; they had to be recomposed from scratch, following a few directions found in the manuscript vocal score. The text had also to be edited and be compared with the published version of the sung text of 1927 that was mentioned earlier. Also, some parts of the vocal score had to be compared with the published versions of several ‘hits’ extracted from the operetta.

The spoken parts of the libretto were written by journalist and author Spyros Potamianos (1877–1935) and the lyrics of the singing parts by the composer himself. Here is a short synopsis of the plot: Princess Chalima, on her wedding day with Nouredin (a prince from a different kingdom), falls in love with Prince Shah Rouman, who is believed to have killed her father, and has therefore been captured and condemned to death. In order to postpone his death penalty for some time, he persuades the cook of the palace (Ali Mousaka) to disguise himself as Nouredin and marry Chalima in his place. After a series of comic events, Chalima’s father turns up alive: Since Rouman is not guilty, he is allowed to marry Chalima and together they live happily ever after.

To Greek audiences, *Chalima's tales* is a substitute for the well-known *One thousand and one nights* folk tale collection. Even though the plot is not based on any particular story of this folk tale collection, Potamianos (the librettist) borrowed most of the names of his heroes from it. Chalima, the feminine form of the common name Chalim, meaning soft or calm, appears in the first Greek translations titled *Aravikon mythologikon* [Arabic folk tale collection (Venice, 1757–1762)] (Kechagioglou 1988) and *Nea Chalima* (Vienna, 1791–1794), as another name for the Persian storyteller Scheherazade. Through these translations, these folk tale collections became known in Greece and later in the wider Balkan area as the *The fairy tales of Chalima*, and at the same time this phrase acquired a proverbial meaning used until now, especially in the political arena. Three years before the premiere of the operetta, a scholar by the name of Kostas Trikoglidis published a new translation of the collection directly from the Arabic language (Trikoglidēs 1921–1923). The rendering and spelling of the names Potamianos used for the script of the operetta are very similar to those that appear in the Trikoglidis edition, which became an immediate publishing success, and one could guess that this was one of the reasons that led Sakellaridēs and Potamianos to choose this subject. The only name that does not come from the collection is that of the cook who is called Ali Mousakas after the famous dish ‘moussaka’, made with ground beef and eggplants, meaning ‘chilled’ in Arabic. Besides the names, what Potamianos and Sakellaridēs borrowed from the collections was the spirit, the sensuous and luxurious atmosphere, as well as their mixture of comic events.

Two more allusions are worth noting with regard to the plot. The first is the ballet in the second act titled ‘The dance of the seven veils’, after Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* and, subsequently, Richard Strauss’ opera. The second allusion is a song from the second act entitled ‘Leila’s ballad’. In the published version of the libretto for the 1927 performance, which contained only the singing parts, there was a note explaining that the theme of the song was based on the legend of the *Florentine tragedy* – another Oscar Wilde play. *Florentine tragedy* was staged in Athens on 23 April 1916 (Skrip 1916) and *Salome* on 21 March and 22 October, 1925, a year before *Chalima's* premiere, thus linking the operetta with current theatrical life in Athens (Vasileiou 2005).

As one might expect from the title of the work, Sakellaridēs' composition is full of oriental-type melodies, which, along with the libretto, the scenery and the costumes, leads the imagination of the spectator into the magic world of the orient – hence the subtitle 'spectacular operetta'. All the musical techniques that we now consider as stereotypes in order to depict the East within a Western musical idiom, are present. Most melodies are constructed upon oriental modes, and they are either simply orchestrated over a drone, or more fully through the use of impressionistic chord progressions. The small orchestra that was usually used for the operetta staging does not provide a wide scope for exquisite orchestral colours. Nevertheless, through the excessive use of the oboe, the solo violin and the harp (the prominent instruments in Korsakov's *Scheherazade*), Sakellaridēs manages to create an 'oriental' sound. It is not difficult to trace further musical allusions that come from other 'exotic' operas that were successful on the Athenian stage, including George Bizet's *Les pêcheurs de perles*, Camille Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila* and Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* (Example 1).

Example 1. Allusions to 'exotic' operas

Sakellaridēs, *Chalima*, Act I, m.498. (ballet music)
Ob. Solo
mp

Saint-Saëns, *Samson et Dalila*, Act III, Bacchanale
Ob. Solo
f

Verdi, *Aida*, Act III, Romanza "O cieli azzurri"
Ob. Solo
p

As to the non-exotic musical sections, found mostly in the melodramatic parts of *Chalima*, one finds influences from Bizet's *Carmen* and Puccini's *Tosca* (Example 2).

Example 2. *Non-exotic music section*

Sakellaridis, *Chalima*, Act I, Finale, mm. 883-885.

Puccini, *Tosca*, Act I, mm. 9-14.

A general trait of Sakellaridis' musical style is an avoidance of melodic types found in the Viennese operetta, as Sakellaridēs was trying to achieve a more personal operetta idiom. Another feature is the attention to the correct setting of the Greek language into music. The most interesting aspect of the music, however, is that these oriental-type melodies are set to European and American dance rhythms such as foxtrot, one-step and tango (Example 3).

Example 3. *Cosmopolitan dances in Chalima*

Sakellaridis, *Chalima*, Act I, mm. 711-716.

Two-Lento

Sakellaridis, *Chalima*, Act II, mm. 498-506.

Tango

Here we find the ‘marriage’ of the ‘cosmopolitan’ with the ‘exotic’ element by a Greek composer geographically lying between the East and the West. This musical blending, as unorthodox as it might initially appear, reflects the quest for a European identity by the Athenian bourgeoisie, which started in the early twentieth century. Furthermore, the musical style of *Chalima* became a model for future operettas with similar oriental subjects, and later on for musicals for the stage or the screen (Seiragakēs 2009).² Additionally, it was one of the seeds of a popular urban folk genre known as *Archontorebetiko* [A higher class *rebetiko*] that flourished in the following decades initially in Asia Minor and later in urban centres in Greece, in which *rebetiko* melodic types were combined with European dances. Therefore, we believe that *Chalima* is a unique case in European music of the early twentieth century, since it is very difficult to trace oriental melodies set to European popular dances in that period.

A question that could be raised regarding *Chalima* is whether it is an ‘exotic’ or ‘oriental’ work, using the latter term with respect to Edward Said’s definition (Said 1996: 13–15). As the ‘Western power over East’ is one of the most prominent features a work of art should present in order to belong to the orientalist’s discourse – *Chalima* would not be a strong candidate. As we mentioned earlier, all the traits used by Europeans to depict the East in the nineteenth century, such as sensuality, luxury, and sometimes violence and brutality, are present in *Chalima*; nevertheless imperialistic connotations are not. Such connotations, abundant in the Greek operettas of the first two decades of the twentieth century,³ have ceased to exist after the defeat of the Greek Army in Asia Minor in 1922. The exotic setting of *Chalima* reflects an Athenian bourgeoisie that melancholically contemplates the lost power and the evaporation of the ‘Great idea’ that would create a huge Greek empire. Characteristically, the very last chord – even though the operetta has a happy ending – is a dramatic minor chord.

The very successful production of *Chalima* in 2013 (all performances were sold-out) makes one wonder why this work had to wait for almost

² The following are titles of operettas and reviews based on exotic subjects: *A night in the harem* (1927), *Nasterdin Chotzas* (1928), *Maharajah*, *The beautiful girl of Baghdad* (1932), *The fairy of the Nile* (1934), *Rosa Ispahan* (1937).

³ Spyridon Samaras’ (1861-1917) three operettas *War in war* (1914), *The princess of Sason* [Sazan] (1915) and *The Cretan girl* (1916) are characteristic examples.

seventy years to be revived after its last performance. This unfortunate situation applies to the entire repertoire of Greek operetta, which consists of a vast amount of works, with the exception of three or four of them. Nevertheless, we are optimistic that, in the near future, new ‘treasures’ will be brought back to light after a long hibernation.

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