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Recording Review of Alexis Zoumbas: A Lament for Epirus, 1926-1928 and Five Days Married & Other Laments: Song and Dance from Northern Greece, 1928-1958

Ted Olson

East Tennessee State University, olson@etsu.edu

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Comments

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Levy's approach in those works, and the succeeding Liszt Sonata in B minor, contains the essence of romantic pianism, although he cannot match the remarkable mood of Backhaus's 1932 recording of Op. 79, No 1. Levy's formidable technique makes his Liszt Sonata always interesting, as does his grasp of the work's musical language and formal design. His keen intelligence expertly governs Lisztian rhetoric and makes his account completely convincing despite his decision to ignore some of the composer's markings, which might seem a mortal sin to some but hardly an offense to Levy or his predecessors. This and the Franck are the set's highlights, to my mind. Marston has made the original tapes, most of which are over six decades old (but well engineered for their time, including an experimental stereo track of the Andante sostenuto of the Liszt Sonata on CD 2) entirely listenable, giving full value to Levy's tone. There are a few minor drop-outs *passim* and on some tracks I detected slight modulation noise, doubtless an artifact of the master tapes. *Reviewed by Dennis D. Rooney*

Endnote

1. See reviews of the prior three volumes at ARSC *Journal*, 1998;29(2):243-244; 2000;31(1):157 and 2006;37(1):137.

Five Days Married & Other Laments: Song and Dance from Northern Greece, 1928-1958. Various Artists. Angry Mom Records AMA03 (1 CD or LP).

Alexis Zoumbas. A Lament for Epirus, 1926-1928. Angry Mom Records AMA04 (1 CD or LP).

Released on compact disc and LP by Angry Mom Records and featuring stellar production work by Christopher King, these two albums compile rare recordings of music historically linked to Epirus, a formerly independent mountainous region that today is divided between Greece and Albania. The first album, *Five Days Married & Other Laments: Song and Dance from Northern Greece, 1928-1958*, is a 2013 anthology gathering recordings by several small ensembles of musicians from Epirus. The second album, *A Lament for Epirus, 1926-1928*, released in 2014, gathers a dozen recordings by a single musician from the region, violinist Alexis Zoumbas.

The albums are clearly intended as complementary releases. Together, they showcase an essential part of the traditional rural *demotic* music repertoire in Epirus (urban music in Greece forms another genre of popular music, known as *laiki*). The recordings on both CDs are impeccably mastered – King's widely recognized engineering handiwork erased the age of the original 78-rpm records. And both releases feature liner notes written in rapt yet informed response to the recordings and their original creators (King, a leading scholar of this region's music traditions, is presently writing a scholarly work on the music of Epirus for W.W. Norton). Additionally, the releases boast similar packaging, with paper gatefold sleeves bearing distinctive design work by noted visual artist Susan Archie as well as charismatic cover artwork by renowned illustrator R. Crumb, famously, a passionate collector of 78-rpm records.

In other ways, the two releases are quite distinct. *Five Days Married* portrays musicians performing their beloved regional social music not far from their homes (in Athens,

Greece's center for commercial recording); accordingly, this album projects an aura of boisterous spontaneity and exuberance. Because of this sense of immediacy, the album sounds like a compendium of documentary field recordings, though, of course, these recordings were made for commercial purposes. *Five Days Married* offers several variations of the classic instrumental configuration associated with the musical ensembles of Epirus: clarinet, violin, laouto (a long-necked, fretted stringed instrument of the lute family), and defi (a large hand-held drum). Such performances as the mesmerizing "Skaros," or "Shepherd's Song," from a 1928 Pathe 78 by Elias Litos and Lazaros Rouvas, and the sprightly dance number "Kalokeraki," or "Summer," from a 1934 Columbia record by the duo Nikos Tzaras and Sideris Andrianos, certainly support King's observation that these ensemble pieces from Epirus are "pastoral in nature." King adds that this instrumental music was "likely sourced from the Sarakatsani, a semi-nomadic population that scoured thousands of acres a year to feed their sheep." Indeed, an overt imitation of the bleating of sheep can be heard toward the beginning of "Merko Moirologi," or "A Lament for More Time," a 1929 recording by Manthos Halkias and Folk Orchestra issued on the Columbia label.

A Lament for Epirus, on the other hand, features more formally structured performances, perhaps because Alexis Zoumbas (1883-1946) made the recordings included therein far from Epirus and thus viewed those tunes less as social music and more as compositions to be artistically interpreted. An arresting example of Zoumbas's virtuosity on the violin can be heard on the album's first track: the 1926 recording "Epirotiko Mirologi," translated as "Lament From Epirus" and released on Victor. Having emigrated to the U.S. in 1910, Zoumbas made a living playing his violin in Greek clubs and restaurants in Manhattan (he sent some of his proceeds back to relatives in Epirus); later, Zoumbas recorded 78s for the Panhellenic, Victor and Columbia labels. The twelve recordings on *A Lament for Epirus* were cut for the latter two labels in New York City and Camden, New Jersey, studios between 1926 and 1928.

Zoumbas was unable to return to Epirus during the ensuing years. Living in exile, he continued to innovate on his instrument; his expressive violin style, as documented on these recordings of various traditional tunes from Epirus, was understated yet evocative. Zoumbas's tone on his instrument was profoundly wistful, underscoring King's title for this release. Never returning to Epirus, in the early 1940s Zoumbas relocated from New York City to Chicago, and he later moved to Detroit, where he died. Zoumbas' music reflected an immigrant's lament for his beloved homeland – to him Epirus was gone, but not forgotten.

A difficulty that King obviously overcame when undertaking the production of these two albums was locating clean-playing copies of the original 78s. As he related to me during an interview, "This particular genre of Greek commercial recording did not sell well, nor was it documented as fully as other types of Greek music, such as *rembetiko* [Greece's national urban folk music]. Therefore, recordings of music from Epirus are in and of themselves scarce, and those that do turn up tend to be in very poor physical condition."

King related that he became fascinated with the music of Epirus after buying some "beat-to-death but outstanding Epirot and Southern Albanian 78-rpm discs" while on a family vacation in Istanbul, Turkey. Fascinated by the music on those 78s, he later visited the region, whereupon he realized – he calls it "the most profound discovery of my life" – that "the folk music tradition in Epirus is almost identical in every detail to

the music found on the 78s from the 1920s-1950s. Not only has the repertoire and style remained unchanged, but the actual function of the music is the same today as it was back then. It is not a rejuvenated atavism, nor is it the stuff of revivalists. The music seemingly has always been there, and it remains constant and unchanged because of its value to the people of Epirus.”

Upon conducting further research in Epirus, King identified what distinguishes the region’s music from the other regional and national music genres of Greece: “Most people when they think of traditional ‘Greek music’ either recall the soundtrack for *Zorba The Greek*, mainstream *rembetiko*, or perhaps music from the Greek islands. However, fifty years ago the music of the villages throughout mainland Greece and the islands was much more diverse and vital. The clearest distinction between the music of Epirus and that of the rest of mainland Greece is that the clarinet-based music in Epirus is ‘heavier’ and ‘deeper’ than music found elsewhere.”

Because of King’s efforts, the heavy and deep music of Epirus is now readily accessible for the historical music community to hear, study, and savor. Both *Five Days Married* and *A Lament for Epirus* constitute the first English-language releases solely focused on the music of northern Greece, and the latter album is the very first collection in any language documenting the profoundly moving violin playing of Alexis Zoumbas. *Reviewed by Ted Olson*

Reviewers

Thomas Fine is a member of ARSC, the Audio Engineering Society and the Adirondack 46rs. He owns an analog-to-digital audio transfer studio in Brewster, New York. His studio serves archive and educational institution clients, as well as private collectors and commercial music companies. His specialty is transferring magnetic and grooved-disc media to high-resolution digital formats, and remastering for commercial release. Fine is also an avid collector of music recordings and a student of recording industry history. He can be reached via e-mail at tom.fine@gmail.com.

James Fisher, Professor and Head of Theatre at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, has published many recording and book reviews in the ARSC Journal. He has authored several books, including the two-volume *The Historical Dictionary of American Theater: Beginnings* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), *The Historical Dictionary of Contemporary American Theater* (Scarecrow Press, 2011), *Understanding Tony Kushner* (University of South Carolina Press, 2008), and *The Historical Dictionary of the American Theater: Modernism* (Scarecrow Press, 2007; co-authored by Felicia Hardison Londré). Along with numerous publications, he is also a director and actor, has held several research fellowships, and has edited six volumes of *The Puppetry Yearbook*, as well as essay collections on Tony Kushner, on gay and lesbian theatre, and on plays about capitalism in modernist theatre for McFarland & Co. Fisher is the 2007 recipient of the Betty Jean Jones Award for Excellence in the Teaching of American Theatre from the American Theatre and Drama Society and was elected to membership in the National Theatre Conference in 2010.
