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**VOLKSMUSIK SÜDOSTEUROPAS**

**Solon Michaelides**

**THE NEOHELLENIC FOLK-MUSIC**

**An introduction to its character**

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## Solon Michaelides, Saloniki

## THE NEOHELLENIC FOLK-MUSIC

## An introduction to its character

The Greek people is a musical people. From ancient times, which bequeathed to the world a rich tradition, down to our time, Music — combined with poetry and dance — has been one of the most important artistic manifestations of the Greek people. Song, especially, of a monodic character, has always been their inseparable companion throughout their long history. During their periods of prosperity and flourishing as well as during hardships and slavery the Greek people sought solace in poetry and song. Greeks have moreover a unique gift of improvising, especially in verse; in certain popular fairs even now there take place competitions between popular poets in verse improvisations — in the form of a dialogue — on a certain given subject.

The Neohellenic folk-music may be classed into three groups: a) the folk-songs, b) the folk-dances, and c) the dance-songs or choral dances, a group in which both are combined. This last group reminds us of the ancient combination of the three arts: poetry, dance and music. In the first group may also be included melodies, usually of an idyllic and expressive character, especially composed for the shepherd's flute.

All the manifestations of the private, the social and the national life have offered subjects for the creation of folk-songs. There are folk-songs of almost every kind; so, there are religious songs, patriotic, heroic, amatory, farewell and nuptial songs, lullabies, dirges, pastorals, specific songs for work on the mountains or in the fields, at home or at sea, songs of the seasons, of certain feasts (religious and national), songs connected with popular and national customs and legends, songs of humour, laudatory and carousal songs, games, feast songs (sung during popular banquets, which according to very old customs, are held to celebrate a marriage) the so-called "Τάβλας" = of the table.

It is not difficult to recognize in many of these customs and songs the survival of several traits of the old Hellenic life. Ancient Greeks had also special songs during their "συνήθεια" — banquets (called *παροίτια*, *σκόλια*, *μεταδόρπια*). They had songs for various kinds of work (*ΐουλος* or *οΐλος* sung during wool-spinning, *λιτωέρση* during harvest, *ώσχαφορικά* during vintage,



ἐπιλήνια during the pressing of grapes, etc.); also nuptial songs (ὀμνέναιος), lullabies (βανκαλήματα), lamentations (λίνοσ, ἰάλειμοσ, οἰπόλινοσ etc.) sung either for a beloved dead or for a symbolic loss or disappearance of a God or Goddess (Adonis, ἀδώνια) and so on.<sup>1)</sup>

It must not be considered strange why the old tradition has been kept up alive in Greece. There are many reasons which may fall in a general way, under three main categories: physical, racial and historical. The physical conditions, which inspired the ancients, have most probably remained unchanged. The same clear blue sky, which bathed the Athenians of old, the same fragrant mountains with the shady forests, with pine-trees and fir-trees, the deep ravines, the rapid torrents and the little cool fountains, all full of the shadows of ancient Gods. The same beaches, the same deep blue waters and the beautiful isles of the Aegean sea. All these features are indeed the same. But though the natural scenery remains almost unaltered, how considerably the conditions of life have changed since then. Hence, it would be rather bold to assert that the world of sense and feeling of the Greek people has remained invariable. But many features have survived, which show clearly that the evolution has followed a consistent line. Particularly in the case of folk-music-song and dance — a careful study of such elements as the modes, the tonal systems, the rhythms etc. proves that the aesthetics of the Greek people still preserve certain fundamental principles. However it might be said, incidentally, that this preservation is due to an admirable power of the Greek people in retaining alive and intact all such elements, as are part and parcel of their national personality.

Among the enormous number of the Neohellenic folk-songs, the "historical" songs hold a prominent place. They are still living in the soul of the Greek Nation and they keep the glow of the historical tradition vividly bright. Under this general title we would include most of the songs created during the Ottoman rule, and during or after the War of Independence of 1821. They express on an infinite scale of feelings the sacred and ardent love of the Greek people for freedom. A great number of these songs are known as "Klephtic" and in their text they are unlike anything else in literature. Perhaps some explanation about the history of this important class of songs would be interesting. During the Turkish occupation (from the second half of the 15th century down to 1821) many people used to abandon their families and homes and go to live on the snowclad mountains from where they carried on, for centuries, a continuous warfare against the conquerer. So, a new class of men was created, — the "Klephts" (bandits, robbers), as they were called by the Turks, who spent all their life on the mountains under the most difficult conditions. A great part of their leisure time was given to various athletic exercises, useful to their perilous job, such as running, jumping, shooting, etc.; these defiant men, according to popular legends, developed their abilities to an unbelievable degree of perfection; to mention one or two cases, Captain Zacha-

<sup>1)</sup> We give some more examples in the chapter on folk-dances.

rias could run faster than a horse, while Niko-Tzaras, another famous Klepht, could jump over seven horses standing abreast. Most of them could pass the bullet through a finger ring from a distance of a hundred metres.<sup>1a)</sup>

Poetry and music (song and dance) were also their true and faithful companions. It is well-known that the leaders of the Klephts had their own minstrels, just as the Homeric Kings and Heroes had theirs. Moreover, many of them were known to have the ability of composing, even improvising, verses and songs, and they often made use of it to encourage and inspire their "Pallikars"<sup>2)</sup> (brave warriors). Such a typical example was the famous leader of the War of Independence, Theodore Kolocotronis.

Many of these songs have a heroic tone, others a delicate feeling of tenderness and love, and often of a nostalgic yearning for peaceful life. A feeling also of deep melancholy is profoundly expounded in the melisma of the song. They usually refer either to certain events during the alien rule or to famous Klephts; others are more connected with the War of Independence and its Heroes. They originated in Roumely, Epirus and Peloponnese and they are still sung in almost every part of continental Greece.

An important element of the poetic text observed on the form of the Klephtic songs by Prof. Baud-Bovy ("Sur la strophe de la chanson klephtique" in "Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves" Tome X, 1950, p. 53-78) is that each strophe corresponds to one and a half verse of 15 syllables (verse "politique" of 15 syllables). This is usual also in songs of the Table (Crete), in islands, and Asia Minor

1-8 (ὄρ') σάν πάσ πουλί μου στό Μωριά / 9-15 σάν πάσ στήν "Αγία Λαύρα

1-8 Χαιρέτα μας τήν κλεφτουριά

repeat of the half verse and completion of it

1-8 Χαιρέτα μας τήν κλεφτουριά / 9-15 κι'αυτόν τόν Κατσαντώνη

1-8 πές του γά κάτσει φρόνημα

and then again

(ὄρῆ) 1-8 πές του γά κάτσει φρόνημα / 9-15 κι'όλοταπεινωμένα

etc.

\*

Historically, the Neohellenic folk-music begins with the fall of Constantinople (1453) which led to the collapse of the Byzantine Empire and the subjugation of Greece, i. e. in the second half of the 15th century. It may be divided into two periods, the period of the alien occupation — more than three centuries — and the period following the liberation. It is almost an impossibility to trace the time of the creation and the age of most of the folk-songs, especially those of a general social character. But we may approximately fix the time of the creation of certain historical songs. This, again, is not at all easy

<sup>1a)</sup> See more details about the Klephts in C. Ch. Fauriel's "The songs of Greece", English edition by Ch. B. Sheridan (London 1825); also in G. F. Abbott's "Songs of Modern Greece", Cambridge 1900 (p. 10-14).

<sup>2)</sup> By this name were also called the members of a band.



as in many cases there is no close metrical and rhythmical co-ordination between verse and music, a fact presumably suggesting that they were not created at the same time. Probably, certain folk-songs have deeper roots in the Byzantine folk-music. Nobody, however, can be sure that a certain melody is exactly the same as it was sung in those rather remote times; in fact, taking into consideration certain peculiarities of the Greek folk-singer to which we shall refer later on, we should think it rather improbable. Judging from the twining of the melody, the intervals used, its phrasing and general character, we may say that certain songs keep their principal characteristics from a rather long time. Unfortunately, no folk-songs have been found in MSS. from Byzantine\*times. The oldest MS seems to be found in the Monastery of Iberon on Mount Athos; it dates back to the 17th century, and contains 13 folk-songs in Byzantine notation.<sup>3)</sup>

There are songs which have a panhellenic character, i. e. they are sung in almost every part of Greece, in different variations of course.

But there are also thousands of songs originated in a certain district and having a distinct character of their own.

A particular class of songs is that of the so-called (“Τάβλας”) “songs of the table” or sitting songs. These songs are sung during banquets or feasts while people are sitting, eating and drinking at the table for hours. And of course, song is the indispensable companion.

We have already said that the Greek folk-song is almost exclusively monodic. This applies also to our church music in its strict Byzantine tradition, where only a pedal may be accepted.

But in spite of this fact there are songs with a polyphonic character. This class of a rather limited character but nevertheless extremely interesting can be met in some parts of Epirus (Northwestern Greece).

These songs are sung either by men alone or women or even by a mixed group. It is a very curious phenomenon observed by Mr. Peristeris of the Archives of the Academy of Athens. According to his observations the main melody is sung by one person called “παρτής” (a “tenor”), who takes the principal part. The second singer (“γυριστής ή κλώστης”) is the decorator of the melody. And there are two more singers keeping a pedal. Thus the song may be in 3 or in 4 parts.

But there is an interesting point: The use of the harmonic interval of the major second; at the end they meet on the unison. The range of the song is usually very limited.

A similar phenomenon is observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina in Yugoslavia (see Richtman “Les formes polyphoniques dans la musique populaire de Bosnie”, journal of I.F.M.C. 1952, p. 30—35).

<sup>3)</sup> K. Psachos: “Folk-songs of Gortynia”. p. ia.

## Modes & Scales

The Neohellenic folk-music contains, on the one hand fundamental elements of the ancient Greek music, and, on the other, well pronounced features of the chromatic oriental music. In the Ionian islands, near Italy, there is a greater influence of the major and the minor modes.

These elements are rather freely intermingled and, therefore, are to be found everywhere. But generally speaking the diatonic element is prevailing over the chromatic. Here is a list of some modes used in the Neohellenic folk-music.

**Example 1**

The musical notation for Example 1 consists of four staves, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The first staff, labeled "Ancient Modes", shows a diatonic scale: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The second staff, labeled "Chromatic", shows a chromatic scale: C4, C#4, D4, D#4, E4, E#4, F4, F#4, G4, G#4, A4, A#4, B4, B#4, C5. The third staff, labeled "Mixed", shows a mixed scale: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The fourth staff, labeled "Major & minor", shows a major and minor scale: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. Each staff ends with "etc.".

A careful study of the modes and the tonal structure of the Greek songs will give us an approximate idea of the place the various elements occupy in them. Here are some figures:

Out of 1108 Greek folk-songs from every part of Greece, as they appear in the principal collections, we found 691 in the ancient modes, i.e. 62 % of the whole are exclusively modal, 91 are purely chromatic (8 %) while 142 (13 %) are of a mixed character. The remaining 184 (17 %) are in the two modern modes, chiefly the Major. So, based on these observations we can say that about 60 % of the Greek folk-songs are modal, 20 % chromatic and mixed and 20 % Western European, in the sense of being in the two modern modes.

Of the ancient modes predominate the Aeolian and the mode of Dorian. Many songs have a limited compass and they don't touch the 6th degree which distinguishes the Aeolian from the Dorian.

In Epirus there have been traces of the pentatonic scale, too.



Melodic features

Many of the Greek songs, especially those in the Aeolian, begin on the seventh degree proceeding to the Tonic. Very often this is done on an anacrusis.

Example 2



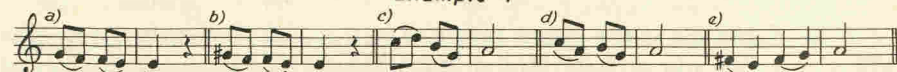
The anacrusis sometimes is extended to a small phrase ending usually on the Tonic thus giving the impression of a little prelude helping to establish the Tonality. This feature may have come from the Byzantine music, where one of the elements of the mode is a small phrase, a sort of formula of intonation (ἐπιγίγνιμα, ἀπιγίγνιμα). In many songs this is made on an exclamative vowel before the actual beginning of the verse (ὦ!, ὦρ, "Αχ!).

Example 3



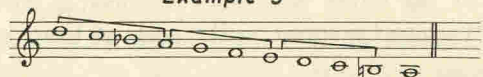
Some characteristic features at the ending of phrases are the following:

Example 4



In certain Greek folk-songs we find applications of the Tonal systems of ancient Greeks. May I remind you e. g. of the Lesser Perfect System (Σβσσιμα τέλειον "Ελασσόν). This was formed by the conjunction of 3 Dorian tetrachords with one added note (προσλαμβάνόμενος)

Example 5



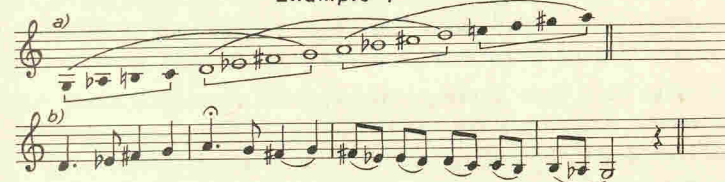
Here is an example in which we have an application of this system. This is a usual phenomenon in songs moving between the 6th degree to the octave of it (vi<sub>4</sub> — vib)

Example 6



Another usual phenomenon is that when the melody surpasses the 8ve, the song does not take notes of the same scale but enters in a new tetrachord, separated by a disjunction.

Example 7



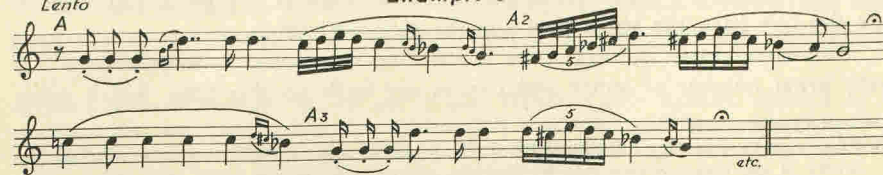
Generally speaking the Greek folk-melody works more usually with stepwise intervals, the principal aim of the popular creator being the elaboration of the notes.

**Compass.** The range of the vocal melodies are rarely more than an 8ve or 9th in songs of a limited range. The melody moves between VII — 4, VII — 5, 1—8 (or in extended range VII—7, VII—8).

Forms-Rhythms

The rhythmic structure and the form of many Greek folk-songs are very clear; the phrases are well defined both by the shape of the melody and the internal rhythms, and are often governed by a right sense of symmetry. But a good number of songs, especially the Klephtic — which constitute an important class — have a very elastic and almost imperceptible rhythmic structure; the notation of these songs becomes very difficult. Moreover, the Greek folk-singer rarely repeats the same song (particularly of this class) in the same way; he is helped by an unusual ability for variation and decoration. Owing to this reason there exist a large number of variants of many songs (especially of the Klephtic class). This tendency for variation constitutes an important element of the melody-making of the Neohellenic popular musician. In this way a phrase of a song when repeated, appears usually varied; at the same time the melody is decorated with rich melismatic ornamentation. This applies especially, as we have already stated, to the Klephtic songs.

Example 8





In short songs, such as carols, games etc. the form is very simple; usually two phrases, either AA or AB. The length of the two phrases is often equal, and both endings are made on the Tonic.

Another common pattern is AAB<sup>4</sup>) with both parts repeated; sometimes the place of the two phrases is changed, as in the type ABAB. Usually the phrase repeated is decorated either slightly, when the song is quick and short, or to a greater degree when it is slow and more lyrical.

Other songs have their phrases (AB) repeated alternately many times with different verses. Sometimes the second phrase is given more prominence by repetition (ABB). An interesting feature is the interpolation of a third phrase, and in such a case the type may be ABCABA etc.



There are several other form-types; but generally speaking, two principles govern the architectural structure of the Greek folk-songs: a) the initial motive or phrase, and b) the Tonic, both play an important rôle. Thus, usually the other phrases are derived from the first, or they use important elements of it.

The endings are made mostly of the Tonic. This is responsible for a feeling of monotony which, however, is in many cases relieved by the decorative and melismatic ornamentation of the melody.

The next degree in importance, both from the cadential and the melodic points of view, is the seventh. Many intermediary phrases end on the seventh (whole-tone from the Tonic); others while ending on the Tonic descend on to the 7th before taking the next phrase.



**TIMES:** In the Neohellenic folk-music we often meet times which are not usual in the folk-music of Western European nations. Of particular interest are the five-part, the seven-part and the nine-part times.

The seven-part (7/8, 7/4) time is the Greek national "par-excellence". A very great number of songs and dances are built on this time, which every

<sup>4</sup>) This form-type is very common with dance-songs, in which the first phrase sung by the leader of the dance is repeated by the whole group of dancers.

Greek feels as natural to perform as a Western European the 2/4 time. It was known to ancient Greeks by the name of "Epitritos" (— u —). In the folk-music it appears 3 + 4 usually with two metrical accents on the first and the 4th (See Ex. 10). The 5 part (5/8, 5/4) is another uncommon time (in ancient metrics called „Paeons“). The 5 part is particularly interesting because of its subdivision of the beats:  $\frac{9}{8} = \frac{3}{8} + \frac{2+2+2}{8}$  or the reverse; sometimes it appears 5 + 4.



### Folk-Dances

Dance was an art which the Greeks cultivated with love and passion from very remote times. According to the ancient mythology Rhea, the mother of the Olympic Gods, (Jupiter, Neptune, etc.) was the first to be enchanted by this art; she in her turn taught the dance to her priests, the Kouretes (Κουρήτες) in Crete and the Korybants (Κορύβαντες) in Phrygia. In Homeric times both song and dance were the indispensable embellishments of every religious ceremony and of every national or private feast; even in ancient mysteries, dance was a means of initiation. It was considered as an exceptional advantage for every body, including those of the higher classes as well as those of royal descent, to be initiated in the secrets of Terpsichore's art.<sup>5</sup>) In the classical times the art of dancing was developed to its highest degree. Young men and maidens in Athens, Sparta, Delos, almost everywhere, were taking active part in religious or national manifestations.

We take an idea of the steps, movements, choreographic combinations and generally of the character of various dances from vase-paintings, bas-reliefs,

<sup>5</sup>) Neoptolemos or Pyrrhos, son of the famous Homeric hero Achilles, excelled as a dancer and was considered as the inventor of a wellknown war-dance, called after his name Pyrrhichios (Lucian). The two sons of the King Alkinoos danced with admirable art at the feast given in Ulysses's honour (Odyssey, IX, 370—380).



frescoes, inscriptions, as well as from a few ancient writers who deal with the art of dancing and various well-known dances of their time.<sup>6)</sup>

The passion for the dance was preserved by the Greeks through the ages. In Byzantine times, though the spirit of Christianity did not permit or encourage such displays, the people, as is well-known, enjoyed dancing on many occasions especially in popular fairs and the marriage. But it is during the Ottoman occupation that both the folk-song and the folk-dance regained their place in the life of the Greek people. In our days, too, the dance — most frequently combined with song — is the principal embellishment of many religious, national and domestic manifestations. And the nimbleness, grace and artistic performance are considered enviable qualities in youths, as in ancient times.

The folk-dances are usually named after the place where according to popular tradition they originated (Cretan, Thessalic). Others have a general name or title expressive of a special kind of dance, or rhythms and movements of the dance ("Syrtós"). Others, again, are connected either with a historical event (dance of Zalongo) or with a certain profession (dance of the Butchers).

Some of the folk-dances have, it seems, a very old tradition. Such is a famous war- (or sword-) dance of Crete, called "Pyrrhichios" (Pyrrhic), which has in its movements a striking resemblance to an ancient Cretan dance of the same name described by Homer in the Iliad (S, verses 590—605).<sup>7)</sup> The dancers forming a circle and armed with their swords (as in the Homeric description) dance by two, with the musician playing the "lyra" in the middle. The Pyrrhic is now danced especially during the marriage feast.<sup>8)</sup> Another dance with the name "Syrtos", which is now the most popular dance, was also known in ancient times, as it is proved by the inscription of Epaminondas, dated from the middle of the first century A. D. and found in Bœotia. A third dance, Gheranos (Γέρανος), danced in some Aegean islands, was also in use by the ancients.<sup>9)</sup> A fourth dance, the well-known Butchers' dance, is of

<sup>6)</sup> Mention should be made, besides Homer and Hesiod, of the following: PLATO: ("Laws" VII) distinction of the dances into war-dance, called Πυρρικήσις (or Πυρρική) and into peace-dance, called Ἐμμέλεια and analysis of the character and the movements), XENOPHON "Banquet" II, IX ("Συμπόσιον"; description of dances performed by professional dancers, admired even by Socrates), PLUTARCH "Symposial problems" ("Συμποσιακά προβλήματα" IX, 15: technical analysis of the three parts of dancing), LUCIAN "On dancing" ("Περὶ ὀρχήσεως"; detailed examination of the art of dancing and its great moral and educational value, description of certain dances etc.), LIVANIUS: "Πρὸς Ἀριστέστην ὑπὲρ τῶν ὀρχηστῶν ἢ ὑπὲρ τῶν μίμων". Also Athenaeus ("Δειπνοσοφισταί", XIV). POLLUX (in his concordance "Ὀνομαστικόν", IV) etc. A thorough and profound study of the ancient Greek Orchestics is made in Maurice Emmanuel's "La danse grecque antique", Paris 1896.

<sup>7)</sup> See the description in Pope's "Homer's Iliad", p. 669—670. See also Plato: Laws, VII.

<sup>8)</sup> It is also danced in the same way in certain other parts, as in Zante, where probably it was transferred by Cretans during the evacuation of their island in 17th century.


<sup>9)</sup> This dance was believed to have been invented by Theseus who danced it for the first time in the island of Delos in the company of the lads and maids he had rescued from the Minotaur in Crete. The movements of the dance sought to express the intricate windings leading out of the labyrinth, the home of the Minotaur.

Byzantine origin and was then known by the name of Makellaricos; it was a dance of the Union of Butchers.

Usually the Greek folk-dances are danced by a group of men or women (sometimes mixed) with a leader, who leads the dance and often sings in dialogue with the group. The man leader, often held by the second dancer by a handkerchief, dances with vivid and flexible movements, turns round, bends his body, leaps gracefully and bears his hills with the right hand. He, then, stops to sing the first verse which is repeated by the other dancers; the second verse is then sung in the same way and so on — the leader's melody being often varied (sometimes the group is divided in two and sing antiphonally). Very often the place of the leader is taken by each of the dancers — or those more skilful-successively.

The men's dances are very lively, both in rhythm and in movements, while those of women are more delicate and rather restrained. Some dances have also a sort of mimic action; for instance in a fishermen's dance called "Trata", the dancers are imitating the movements of fishermen while pulling the nets. Others symbolically reproduce a historical event, which has entered into the sphere of national legends.

The most popular dances are the "Syrtós" (2/4) and the "Kalamatianós" (7/8) danced in every part of Greece.

But there are also other popular dances among which the so called "Tsámicos"; it has come originally from the North of Epirus, and it is very popular especially in Peloponese. Its rhythmical structure is in 3/4 with a well pronounced accompaniment ; its character is enthusiastic, joyful and graceful too.

### Popular Instruments

The dances, and sometimes the songs too, are accompanied by various instruments among which there are also universal ones such as the violin and the clarinet. There are various kinds of popular wind, stringed and percussion instruments; they vary in shape and in popularity and a special mention must be made of the "lyre" being most probably a descendant of the Rebec, it is a small instrument, long and narrow in some districts (Asia Minor) or rather round in others (Dodecanese, Crete, Thrace). It has three strings (rarely four) tuned a perfect fifth and fourth from the lowest.

And with this we end this lecture which may be considered an introduction to the Greek folk-music.

My intention was to draw before you a general picture of a most complex and multiform organism which is the Greek folk-music, an organism full of life, constituting a living phenomenon, evolving incessantly through the ages, the appearance of which is varied in a thousand ways making its study and conception an extremely difficult task.



*Note: The musical examples have been taken from the following Collections:*

1. BAUD-BOVY, S.: "Chansons du Dodécanèse", Ex. 3b, 11a.
2. CONSERVATOIRE OF ATHENS: "SO Folk-songs of Peloponnese and Crete", Ex. 3a.
3. LAMBELET, G.: "La musique populaire grecque", Ex. 2, 6, 10.
4. MERLIER, M.: "Songs of Roumely", Ex. 7b, 8, 9.
5. MICHAELIDES, S.: *Unpublished collection of folk-songs of Cyprus, Ex. 11b.*

P. S. In my book of the "Neohellenic Folk-music" (1948) there is <sup>at</sup> the end a rather complete Bibliography on the subject of my lecture.

S. M.

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