Modality and Diversity in Cretan Music

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Abstract: Cretan music is a vibrant and diverse living tradition, with identity-forming significance for the local population. It is a modal music whose modes, unlike in related modal traditions, cannot be described on the basis of characteristic phrases, as the same skopous (basic melodies) can be played in different modes.

In this article, after a short introduction to the structure and certain peculiarities of Cretan music, four characteristic families of modes are described. The flexibility and permeability in the usage of modality are demonstrated using examples from the repertoire of kontylies. Such freedom is also found in the variation, embellishment and combination of melodies and the relationship between text and music. Such a high degree of flexibility is essential for Cretan music to fulfil its social function. It supports spontaneity, communication and expression in the context of participatory music-making in the parea (community) as well as the mutual interaction between musicians and dancers in Cretan dance music. The flexibility in dealing with musical material leads to great diversity.

Keywords: Cretan Music, Kritika, Modal Traditions, Modal Flexibility, Cretan Ussak, Segah, chromatic Modes, Kontylies, Foradaris, Souman Alis.

The traditional music of the island of Crete is – like most other forms of traditional Greek music – a modal music. In a typical ensemble of Cretan music, a modal melody is played by a solo instrument – usually a bowed string instrument like the Cretan lyra (λύρα) or a violin. The same melody will be by a singer but with different ornamentation. They are accompanied by a plugged instrument, like the Cretan laouto (λαούτο), which plays the same melody but with another style of ornamentation. So, the music produced resultantly is a heterophony of the variants of the same melody: The soloist on the lyra adds considerable embellishments (like trills) and plays more elaborate variations. The singer usually presents a more abstract version of the tune, but contributes some typical vocal ornaments. The accompanying laouto adds something commonly referred to as “bells” (καμπάνες), i.e. the lute player hits a lower
empty string on every free space – when there is a pause or a longer note in the melody – to create a continuous pulse. Consequently, the accompaniment on the lauto is a combination of the melody and a rhythmic drone or bourdon (ίσον). The drone also provides a percussion-like rhythmic fundament. This accompaniment style became more prominent during the second half of the twentieth century when it became common practice to add a second accompanying instrument – a second laouto or a mandolin or, especially since around 1970, a guitar.

Figure 1

A typical Cretan ensemble with lyra (A. Papadakis, centre) accompanied by two lauta (G. Psarakis and A. Myxakis)

The rhythmic drone may consist of one or two notes, usually the tonic and a second tonal centre like the fifth or fourth degree, or, more generally, the notes considered the central notes of the melody. However, considerable flexibility exists in the choice of the drone notes and the perception, which are the important notes of a phrase, seems to have changed in some cases due to the influence of Western harmony during the twentieth century. This rhythmic drone is not static: Modulation is common in Cretan music, and when the melody progresses to a different mode or a different tetrachord, the bourdon notes may change, resulting in a shifting drone.¹

The modal nature of Cretan music is clearly audible in the early recordings from the first half of the twentieth century. But like in many other Greek traditions, during the second half of the twentieth century, a tendency existed to integrate harmony and reinterpret the melodic structures in the direction of the Western major/minor system. Over the last twenty years, however, a more traditional and modal approach to Cretan music has become fashionable again. Hence, modality in Cretan music is not endangered.

Dealing with Modality in Cretan Music

While attempting to describe the modes of Cretan music, we encounter certain peculiarities: In most oriental music traditions like Turkish makam or Indian raga, melodic aspects like typical phrases (e.g., pakad) or the melodic progression (e.g., seyir) can be more characteristic for a mode than the scale. In Turkish music, for instance, the melodic progression known as seyir is considered an important aspect of a makam by most contemporary experts. From this point of view, modes are more like melodic recipes or melody types or melodic personalities. In Cretan music, however, this concept does not work well, as one basic melody – one skopos – can be played in different modes. The interval structure is not (or at least not always) an essential aspect of the melodic outline of a skopos. Rudolf M. Brandl described the variability of skeleton melodies in terms of modality and meter as a characteristic feature of Greek traditional music and called this the “skopos principle”. Therefore, as the interval structure of a melody is flexible and changeable, we can, in turn, not use the melodic aspect to describe the modes. For this reason, I prefer to talk of modal families instead of specific modes in Cretan music, to describe the interval structure and details like flexible notes and then demonstrate the flexibility of the usage by means of music examples. The modal flexibility of melodies is an important aspect of diversity in the music that leads to a wide melodic variety. This will be discussed in more detail below.


\(^3\) Cınuçen Tanrıkorur, Osmanlı Dönemi Türk Musikisi (İstanbul: DergahYayınları, 2003), 166; Murat Aydemir, Turkish Music Makam Guide (İstanbul: Pan Yayıncılık, 2010), 26; Walter Feldman, Music of the Ottoman Court: Makam, Composition and the Early Ottoman Instrumental Repertoire (Berlin: VWB, Verl. für Wiss. und Bildung, 1996), 338.

Another difficulty when dealing with modality in Cretan music is the lack of a traditional theoretical terminology. Most traditional musicians do not attribute names to the modes, and many are unfamiliar with even the concept of modality. To describe what they play, musicians often use Italian note names (do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, si) and the Greek terms “anichto”, “jemato” and “apo mesa”. Anichto (which means open) implies that the important notes can be played on an open string. Jemato (filled) is the opposite: It means that the tonic or tonal centre is in a position where the string has to be stopped with a finger. Apo mesa means that the melody is played from a lower string, in a deeper register. This term is used because traditionally on the old type of the lyra, melodies were played mostly on the highest string – in a higher register. None of these terms, however, give a detailed description of the mode to be played: “anichtosto la” can mean a chromatic mode on A, and “sto sol jemato” may imply something like Segah (or Legetos, the Byzantine counterpart) on B, where the finalis is on the third of the G string. But these are just two of many options that can be implied by such descriptions.

Some Cretan musicians also use makam names such as Ussak or Hicaz or Western terminology such as maggiore or minore. But such usage does not mean that the music shall resemble the tonal/modal concepts, as they are understood in their original context. The term Hicaz is used very generally to describe anything chromatic, and “sol maggiore” means little more than that an accompanying guitarist may use a G-major chord. So, when describing Cretan modes, either makam names or Byzantine terminology can be used as a starting point, owing to the lack of corresponding local terminology. Then – in addition – we can describe some characteristic differences found in Cretan music.

An attempt to systematically describe the modes used in Cretan music was undertaken by Kaloyanides. He differentiates between “tetral modes” and “pental modes”, depending on whether the second tonal centre is on the fourth or fifth of the scale, i.e. the mode starts with a tetrachord or a pentachord. In addition to seventeen tetral modes and six pental modes, he also lists five “keys” where “[t]onal centers are usually the tonic, the third degree, and the fifth degree of the scale.”

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7 The majority of Cretan music is dance music. In addition to the five major dances – Syrtons, Siganos, Pento(zali)s, Malevzioti and Sousta – common all over the island, approximately another twenty local dances exist. Many of them are rarely practised today and less well known. It is not possible to quantify
According to my research, however, all of the main modal families can be observed in most forms of Cretan music at least occasionally, except some almost forgotten local dances known only in certain areas. The music for such rare dances tends to have a very limited repertoire of musical phrases with less modal diversity. A similar limitation applies to a few non-danced musical forms, such as the music to the Cretan epic Erotokritos, where usually only a small number of specific melodies are used. Kaloyanides’s proposal to categorise Cretan modes is informative, but has established itself among neither the musicologists nor musicians on Crete.

Essential in creating a consciousness for the modal nature of Cretan music was and is the Labyrinth Musical Workshop. The Workshop was launched in 1982 by the Irish-born musician Ross Daly, and since 2003, its music seminars have been held in Houdetsi, a small village in central Crete. “Labyrinth’s goal is the initiation of primarily young people into a creative approach to traditional musical idioms from various parts of the world” with a “focus primarily on the modal musical traditions of the world”. The program in Houdetsi includes courses and seminars on Cretan music and instruments alongside Turkish makam, Arabic, Bulgarian, Indian or Persian music as well as concerts by master musicians from around the world, allowing students to experience such music traditions and their relationships and differences in a broader context. This has inspired many Cretan participants, offering them a perspective which was quite different from the ‘usual’ influence of Western music.

Characteristic Modal Structures of Cretan Music

The most prominent modal structure in Cretan music is a type of mode sometimes described as ‘Cretan Ussak’. It is related to the Ussak/Hüseiyni and Bayati family of makam and the Protos Ichos of Byzantine music. It is a mode with a flexible second degree and a minor third. The secondary tonal centre can be either the fourth or fifth (both natural) resulting in a tetral or a pental form of the mode. The sixth degree can be a minor sixth or a flexible note. In some cases, the sixth can also be omitted, the number of these dances exactly, as some of them have several different local names or represent hard-to-distinguish variants, the opinions concerning the categorisation of which diverge.

Although Kaloyanides’ dissertation is titled “The Music of Cretan Dances”, he also discusses modality in the Rizitika, a type of vocal music from the white mountains in Western Crete that is not danced to.

especially in case of the music for the Cretan bagpipe Askomandoura, which can only play a six-note scale. The seventh degree is a minor seventh and has special importance as a subtonic, i.e. the seventh underneath the tonic is a secondary melodic centre. The gravity of the melody – and also the drone/bourdon – alternates between the tonic and this subtonic.

The most significant characteristic feature of this type of mode in Cretan music is the extreme flexibility of the second degree. For comparison, in Turkish makam Ussak, the flexibility of the second degree means that the second will be a small whole tone when the melody moves upward (i.e., one comma less than the natural whole tone), and in downward movement, it will be two or three commas lower, resulting in a tone halfway between semitone and whole tone (In Arabic theory, this will be considered a three-quarter tone.). In Cretan music, however, the flexibility of the second degree covers the full range between the whole tone and semitone, which is impossible in Turkish Ussak. When such a melody is played on a fretted instrument like the laouto, mandolin or guitar, this interval is played alternating between a whole tone and a semitone, dependent on the direction of the melody. When transcribing such melodies, many authors notate it that way, e.g. in a mode on D as alternating between E and E-flat. This is an oversimplification, however, as on fretless instruments like lyra or violin or in the voice of a singer, considerable microtonal details can be observed, often with three or four distinct positions (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2
Cretan Ussak tetrachord
a) as usual notated and played on instruments with frets,
b) flexible intonation on fretless instruments and voice

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The term “comma” is mainly used in the context of Turkish and Arabic music, but also by Greek theorists, as a descriptive size for small intervals and pitch differences in the dimension of the Pythagorean or syntonic comma, about a ninth or eighth of a whole tone, with regionally different views on the right size of the comma. See: Habib Hassan Touma, *Die Musik der Araber*, 3rd ed. (Wilhelmshaven: Noetzel, Heinsrichshofen-Bücher, 1998), 49; Ioannis Zannos, *Ichos und Makam, vergleichende Untersuchungen zum Tonsystem der griechisch-orthodoxen Kirchenmusik und der türkischen Kunstmusik* (Bonn: Orpheus-Verlag, 1994), 92–96. In modern Turkish makam theory “coma” (with only one m) decidedly means a ninth of a tone.
A popular example of Cretan Ussak is the famous syrtos “Mono ekeinos p’agapa” (Μόνο εκείνος π’ αγαπά). It was recorded for the first time in 1946 under the title “Spilianos Syrtos” by Thanassis Skordalos. Skordalos is considered to be the most important Cretan lyra player of the twentieth century, and this is his most famous piece. The audio example, a live recording from 1976, demonstrates the typical microtonality of the mode. Kaloyanides, who uses this syrtos as an example for his “Cretan tetral Mode IV”, describes that “the most interesting aspect of this mode is that the second degree of the scale can be at an interval of either a minor or a major second” and transcribes the melody as alternating between E and E-flat, ignoring microtonal details (see Fig. 3). The same convention is also used in more contemporary notations of this piece. The authors of these scores (P. Perysinakis, S. Petrakis) are however definitely aware of the actual microtonality, as demonstrated by the own use of Cretan Ussak in many of their compositions and recordings.

The flexibility and intonation of the second degree are not handled uniformly in Cretan music. In cases where the second degree tends towards the whole tone, a demarcation from a minor scale is not always clear. I consider minor-like modes to be rather atypical for Cretan music and believe that the majority of such melodies should rather be regarded as a variant of the Cretan Ussak with less pronounced flexibility of the second degree. Kaloyanides, however, lists one pental and three tetral modes with a large

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12 Kaloyanides, “The Music of Cretan Dances,” 120.


second and minor third degree. The difficulty of such distinctions can also be seen in the fact that “Protos Syrtos”, the most frequently played piece of Cretan music, is classified by Petrakis as Ussak on E,\textsuperscript{15} while Kaloyanides describes a switching between the tetral mode VII (one of his minor-like modes) and the key of G major.\textsuperscript{16}

A second modal category very typical for Cretan music is a mode with a small second degree and a minor third, where the secondary tonal centre is usually on the fourth degree. Such modes can be compared with Turkish makam Kürdi and also resemble what in the West is known as the Phrygian church mode. These modes are very common in all types of Cretan music. Examples will be given below when discussing the flexibility in the usage of modes in Crete. As we will see in these examples, a certain flexibility of the second degree (although much less than in Cretan Ussak) can also be observed occasionally in these modes.

The next very important modal category also uses a small second degree and a minor third but within a completely different tonal architecture. It is related to what is known in the whole orient as Segah or Sikah and is called Legetos in Byzantine music. These modes are easily recognisable based on a common melodic character, independent of the geographic origin of the music.\textsuperscript{17} In Turkish music, the flavour (Çeşni)\textsuperscript{18} of Segah can easily be evoked with simple “stereotyped motives and phrases”.\textsuperscript{19} This mode has two secondary tonal centres: They are a minor third above the finalis and a major third below the finalis – on the sixth degree. For Cretan music, it is important to note that the combination of these three tonal centres form a major chord, with the finalis as the third of the major chord, and this major chord is frequently used to accompany such melodies. To emphasise the modal character, the third of the major chord may be duplicated. More common, however, is the use of additional chords – especially the major dominant – resulting in a harmonic accompaniment as in Western music and in a hybrid nature of such music, with the harmonic tonic a major third below the modal finalis. This ambiguity is well expressed in Petrakis’ notation of the Sitiakes Kontilies, where “Fa# Segah” is given as a modal categorisation but D as an accompaniment chord, with the occasional change to A (the dominant of the Western D major) and in one case G (subdominant). The score consists of five melodies (gyrismata) that all end

\textsuperscript{15}Andreoulakis and Petrakis, \textit{Skopoi & Mantinades tis Kritis}, 46.

\textsuperscript{16}Kaloyanides, “The Music of Cretan Dances,” 105.


\textsuperscript{18}For an explanation of the concept of Çeşni see: Aydemir, \textit{Turkish Music Makam Guide}, 19.

on the modal finalis Fa#, the third of the D major chord. To Western ears – and most of today’s Cretans are familiar with Western music – these seem to be melodies in Western D major that all end on the third degree by chance. The phrases, however, correspond to the Segah melody type, and a modal view of such melodies causes a distinctly different listening experience. If such melodies are accompanied in bourdon style, both the modal finalis and the harmonic tonic are possible drone notes.

Such hybridisation is typical for East Cretan Kontylies from the region of Sitia, and its development can be well understood from the examples from the area: Around 1900, Sitiakes Kontylies were usually played on the violin or lyra and accompanied only by a drum (Daouli), which did not raise the question of a correct modal or harmonic accompaniment. The musician who exerted the strongest influence on the development of the Sitiakes Kontylies in the twentieth century was Stratis Kalogeridis. He had studied violin in France between 1910 and 1915, where he learnt the Western system of harmony and music writing. Having returned to Sitia, Kalogeridis collected the traditional melodies of the region and wrote them down in Western notation, in European major and minor scales, with simple harmonic accompaniment in the style of a score for violin and piano. He recorded some of the music on Shellac, and those recordings became extremely popular. During and after the Second World War, “European” dances (a term used in Crete to refer to non-Greek dances like waltz, polka, fox or tango) became popular in Crete, the music for which was also played on the violin in Western scales accompanied by chords on the guitar. Hence, the guitar became a popular instrument in the area at that time. This music did fit perfectly with the Kalogeridis style of playing kontylies: He became the role model for a whole generation of violin players, many of whom learned to play “his” kontylies from his records, adopting his style of harmonic accompaniment.

The usage of Segah-like modes in Crete is not restricted to kontylies however, but is also common in other musical forms, especially in Syrtos or in urban music (Tabachaniotika), where the Western harmonic influence is less dominant and another feature known from Turkish Segah can be observed: The usage of a chromatically raised leading-tone on the seventh degree below the finalis, especially in cadential formulae.

Another important category is that of chromatic modes. These are problematic, characterised by an ideological issue. Some authors have rejected the idea of chromatic

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20 Andreoulakis and Petrakis, Skopoi & Mantinades tis Kritis, 57.
22 Hagleitner, “KretischeMusik,” 58, 88.
modes in Greek music, considering them to be foreign. Such a discussion also exists in Cretan music – even in the current century. Chris Williams has argued that chromatic modes have been imported to Crete by immigrants during the twentieth century. It has however been proved that chromatic modes were common on Crete even in the nineteenth century, as documented by Mihaicuta. Among the Cretan songs collected by PavlosVlastos between 1860 and 1901 using Byzantine notation, 25% are chromatic in either the second or the plagal second mode (ichos).

Modes are considered chromatic if they include at least one augmented second in their scale. If this interval is less augmented and the surrounding semitones are in turn a bit larger, this would be considered “soft chromatic” (like the authentic second Byzantine mode or Turkish Hüzzam). And if the augmented interval is “very augmented” this would be “hard chromatic”. In Crete, this difference is not very obvious, and it is not a concept that musicians are familiar with. The second criterion of differentiation is the position of the augmented second. The most common position is between the second and third degree of the scale – as in makam Hicaz. This is the most typical form in Cretan music. It can, however, also be between the third and the fourth degree like in makam Nikriz. This also exists in Crete, but it is less common. We can further distinguish chromatic modes by determining whether the second tonal centre is on the fourth or the fifth degree, resulting in a tetral or pental mode – both are common in Crete. One more possibility is that the augmented second is repeated in the upper tetrachord, resulting in an intense chromatic mode with two augmented seconds. There do exist some examples for this in Crete. It can be concluded that a variety of chromatic modes exists.

23 A summary of this discussion in earlier literature on Byzantine music can be found in: Zannos, Ichos und Makam, 107–114.


26 Dimitris Sgouros, Skopoi kai tragoudia tis Kritis, Apo to archei tou Pavloss Vlastou 1860–1910 (Heraklion: Aegis Film, Audio and Video Productions, 2011), 73.

27 Zannos, Ichos und Makam, 133ff.

The modal categories presented here do not claim to be complete. Also noteworthy, although less characteristic of the music of Crete, are modes that correspond to makam Rast or the European major scale. My presentation so far has focused on particularly characteristic families of modes. On this basis, the flexibility, variety and permeability of the use of modality in Cretan music will now be demonstrated with some specific basic melodies (skopous) as examples.

Flexibility and Diversity in the Use of Modes

The examples presented here are from the repertoire of kontylies, a term used for musical phrases from Central and Eastern Crete. Most kontylies do not have individual names but are rather described by adding the name of a region (Sitiakes Kontylies) or a musician (Kontylies tou Kalogeridi), musical or tonal characteristics (Kontylies sto sol, Anychtes Kontylies) or a typical performance occasion like “tis nichtas” (of the night).

The first example is a kontylia known as “Monokomati Kontylia” (one-part kontylia, referring to a way of singing mantinades – Cretan lyrics – to this melody) or “Kontylies tou Foradari” (referring to the legendary musician Foradaris from Ziros, to whom many kontylies are ascribed in Eastern Crete) or “Kontylies to Kapsilidi” (a legendary musician from the Heraklion district) but also considered characteristic of the village of Kavousi in the Ierapetra area. The kontylia consists of three gyrismata (turns, phrases), but only the first gyrisma is discussed here. This gyrisma is also a characteristic phrase used in East Cretan leaping dances like the Sitiakos Pidichtos, where it is “reserved to the most intense part of this dance when dancers improvise ecstatically”.29

A chromatic version of this kontylia is associated with Foradaris. The following transcription (Fig. 4) is based on a violin performance by Vangelis Vardakis.30


30 My complete transcription of the chromatic version of these “Kontylies tou Foradari” is included in Mihaicuta, “Chromatische Modi,” 418.
Alternatively, the second degree (Bb) in the first bar can be intonated higher, as a (small) major second, resulting in a brighter, makam Rast-like impression, in the ascending part of the melody. The descending part at the end of the melody remains chromatic. This variant is frequently used by Vardakis in cases where he also sings the melody.\textsuperscript{31}

The kontyla can also be played in a mode with a flexible second and a minor third, as in the next example. The transcription (Fig. 5) was made from a violin performance by Giorgos Tsantakis:\textsuperscript{32}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure5}
\caption{Giorgos Tsantakis, "Kontyles tou Foradari", first gyrisma, non-chromatic Version.\newline Transcription: Michael Hagleitner}
\end{figure}

Not only are the two notations in different keys, but also the embellishment and ornamentation are so different that, at first glance, they do not even seem to represent the same piece of music. However, such individual rendering of melodies is typical in Cretan music and is expected from musicians. To understand the common melodic base – the skopos – it can help to reduce the embellished melodies to a melody skeleton, which may look something like this (Fig. 6):

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\textsuperscript{31} An example of this version: Vangelis Vardakis, “Panijiri in Myrsini, Sitias,” field recording by Michael Hagleitner, July 12, 2014, audio.

\textsuperscript{32} Transcription based on: Giorgos Tsantakis, “Kontyliestou Foradari,” field recording by Stefan Safranek during our Excursion to Crete 2014, home studio of G. Tsantakis, Sitia, August 2, 2014.
There also exists an intense chromatic version of the kontylia, where the upper tetrachord is temporarily replaced by a second chromatic (Hicaz) tetrachord at the descending end of the melody in the sixth bar. This variant (see Fig. 7) is considered typical for the repertoire of Kavousi, a village in the Ierapetra area.33

In this first example, we have seen how a basic skopos, a kontylies melody, can be played in four different modal variants: 1. chromatic, 2. partially chromatic with a temporal use of a diatonic Rast tetrachord, 3. nonchromatic with a flexible second degree and a minor third degree, 4. dense chromatic with temporary use of Hicaz also in the upper tetrachord.

The second example is a piece known as “Skopos tou Ali” or “Kontylies tou Foradari” or “Ierapetritikos tou Ali” referring to Souman Alis (also known as Αλής Σουμάνης) a Muslim violin player from Ierapetra who lived around 1900. It consists of two melodies (gyrismata) that are used in several traditional pieces of Eastern Crete, like “Tou Lasithiou to dromo”,34 as well as in some more recent popular songs. A score of the “Kontylies tou Ali” was provided by Zacharias Spyridakis for the students in his Cretan Lyra seminar, held at the Labyrinth Musical Workshop in Houdetsi in 2014.

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33 Mihaicuta, “Chromatische Modi,” 419.
The following notation (Fig. 8) is based on his score. I have slightly simplified it to represent the learning from the seminar. It can be considered a basic form of the skopos as used for educational purposes:

Figure 8
"Kontylies tou Ali", simple version of the skopos as learned in the lyra seminar with Zacharias Spyridakis

This version with a stable small second and third degree is the variant most frequently used in Crete. In Spiridakis’s original score, the Eb was not included in the key signature at the beginning of the line (probably to indicate D as the tonic, as in d-minor), but a flat sign was added on every occurrence of an E, except for a part of the phrase in the second gyrisma, where the flat sign was ‘missing’, as indicated in the following fragment (Fig. 9):

Figure 9
Fragment of the teacher’s score

According to Spyridakis, this is a mistake in the score, but it also indicates that the teacher was concerned about the possibility of flexibility in the second degree of the skopos.

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mode. The use of a flexible second degree is possible in this skopos, as in a recording by Dermitzogiannis:\[^{36}\]

Figure 10
"Kontylies tou Ali", second gyrisma. Version with a slightly flexible second degree as played by Demitzogiannis

In this recording, the melody is played three semitones higher, so the tonic is F and the flexible second is G(b). The first phrase is not included in the figure because the flexible second is only audible in the second gyrisma: The second degree is played almost a quarter tone higher than Gb (indicated with a double arrow) in the ascending movement at the beginning of the phrase, then slightly higher than Gb and at the end of the phrase as Gb. This rather corresponds to a small second that is intoned higher in ascending movements, as the full range between a small and a large second is not used. A fully flexible second degree is, however, also possible in this piece as demonstrated by Giorgos Tsantakis (Fig. 11): He plays the second gyrisma of the kontyla on G in a modality that corresponds to what was described above as Cretan Ussak:\[^{37}\]

Figure 11
"Kontylies tou Ali", second gyrisma. Version with a fully flexible second degree as played by GiorgisTsantakis


Vangelis Vardakis, who is considered a leading violin player from Ierapetra, the hometown of Souman Alis, plays the same kontylia on A with a different modality in both parts (see Fig. 12):³⁸ The first gyrisma (A) uses a chromatic mode (Hicaz on A); the second gyrisma (B) is in Segah on A. The first gyrisma is played in a very rhythmically free manner and with dense ornamentation. I have decided to include his ornamentation in my transcription, as the chromatic nature of the melody is best visible in the ornaments, although the transcription can only give a vague impression of the actual performance with its extreme rubato. The second gyrisma (B) differs significantly from the above examples: Although the intervals (a small second and a small third) are the same as in the simple version (Fig. 6, as taught by Spyridakis), the modal architecture is not Kurdi but Segah, due to the emphasis on the sixth and third degrees as secondary melodic centres. The sixth (F) is used as a base note in the harmonic accompaniment and integrated (the sixth has not been part of the melody in the second gyrisma in the previous examples) into the melody at structurally important positions (bars 19, 21, 23, 24). The second gyrisma is, therefore, a typical example of the tonal ambiguity of Cretan Segah: the modal finalis is on A; the harmonic base, however, is on F and allows an alternative (Western) interpretation as F major.

Figure 12
"Skopos tou Ali" as played by Vangelis Vardakis

In this second example we have seen that different modalities are used in both gyrisma of a Kontyla, this time also including Segah. Such modal flexibility can be observed as an expression of different regional or individual styles, but it also happens that the same musician plays different modal variants of the same phrase in the same place and at the same event.

The Function of Musical Flexibility in Cretan Society

Although the high degree of flexibility in Cretan music is not limited to questions of modality, it affects many musical aspects. As we have already seen in the above examples, musical phrases are individually varied and intensely embellished during performances. In addition, most of the music does not consist of individual and separately played pieces. Rather, in musical practice, melodies are combined flexibly and often spontaneously and assembled into larger musical units. Here too, a great deal of freedom can be observed. Theodosopoulou has coined the term “tunes of the ‘buffet’ type” for such variable structures of Cretan music – a phrase that expresses, that the freedom when combining melodies corresponds to the choice of food on a buffet.\(^{39}\) The relationship between text and music is also dynamic: Different mantinades (pairs of verses) can be sung to the same melody, and the same lyrics can also be sung with different melodies. The verses are, in the ideal case, spontaneously improvised or can be selected from a wide variety of well-known mantinades and freely combined and modified at the moment of making music.\(^{40}\)

This variability of the music leads to great diversity and is important for the music to fulfil its social function. It serves a purpose in Cretan society. Two main contexts where music is played are feasts (glendi, panijiri), where mainly dance music is played, and participatory music making in the community (parea).

In dance music, musicians have to respond to changing dancers and support them. This “connection of mutual interaction […] is the most important motivation for the musicians to perform their music.”\(^{41}\) The majority of dances are performed in an open

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\(^{41}\) André Holzapfel, “Structure and Interaction in Cretan Leaping Dances,” 205.
circle, with the first dancer in the chain having the possibility to improvise. The musicians orientate themselves to these solo dancers, accordingly reacting to the dancers’ gender, age, origin, dance style, performance, among others. During the dance, the dancers frequently exchange places, and when the solo dancers change, the musicians have to react spontaneously, which requires a high degree of flexibility. This also affects the choice of modes they play, as documented by Holzapfel: For example, musicians state that for girls they “generally do not play major themes”\(^\text{42}\) (which in the context of Cretan music includes melodies in Segah) and that they choose to play leaping dances in a certain mode or register depending on the gender or age of the dancers. They also change the mode of a currently playing melody to react to what is happening on the dance floor.\(^\text{43}\) Such rules, however, do not apply in general or island-wide but may be characteristic of certain regions or villages. For example, when playing pidichtos (leaping dance) in Ziros, the home village of Foradaris, the Kontiles tou Foradaris, which are otherwise characteristic of ecstatic moments in this dance, were played slower and on the deepest string with the drum (daouli) pausing or playing very softly when older men danced.\(^\text{44}\)

The most original and probably most authentic form of Cretan music is found in the parea as “participatory musical performances”\(^\text{45}\) in the community, in the circle of friends: “The music is born spontaneously in the parea”.\(^\text{46}\) Brandl described parea as a “key musical-sociological term in Greek folk music”.\(^\text{47}\) This shared creative process allows the community, the parea, to express their feelings and sensitivities, to articulate and reflect current themes, problems or the joy of getting together. Here, music and poetry are means of communication as well as forms of individual expression. This demands a high degree of flexibility, dynamism and expressiveness from the music. Cretan music has essentially been shaped by the fact that it has developed in the context of participatory music-making in the parea, with the structure of music reflecting the requirements of such collective performances.\(^\text{48}\)

\(^{42}\) Ibid. 163.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 181, 194, 196, 197, 204.

\(^{44}\) Vangelis Vardakis, interview by André Holzapfel and Michael Hagleitner. Ierapetra, August 12, 2016.


\(^{46}\) Eleni Dredaki, interview by André Holzapfel. Paraspori, August 15, 2011.


\(^{48}\) Hagleitner, “Kretische Musik,” 64–66.
Conclusion

Cretan music is a vibrant and diverse living tradition, which is of high and identity-forming significance to all social classes and age groups in Crete. To accomplish such liveliness and fulfil its social function, a high degree of flexibility is demanded from the music. The adaptability in dealing with musical material involves flexible and permeable handling of modality and leads to great diversity. Melodies can be transferred from one mode to another, and music in different modes can be freely combined. Cretan music is an important contribution to the diversity of Mediterranean modal music.

Reference List


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