

## Playing Pontic Lyra for Dance – Mike Machin

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### **The Project**

Pontos Project, July 20-29 2014, Thessaloniki  
4 lessons on Pontic Lyra with Giorgos Poulantzaklis, July 21,24,26,28 2014,  
Thessaloniki

### **Achievement of Purpose**

The trip completely exceeded all my expectations. After working at the lyra in isolation for 18 months I was suddenly immersed in an intensive process of learning the dances in dance workshops, learning to play the tunes in lyra lessons and then dancing the same dances and occasionally playing at festivals and celebrations in the evenings. I was thus able to develop really rapidly and acquire a huge amount of material to work at on my return home.

### **Highlights**

The workshop session on dances from Matsouka with live lyra accompaniment from Dimitris Triandyfilidis.

The festival evening at Platanotopos where we danced for the whole evening to lyra and zurna playing of 93 year old Spyros Galetsidis.

The lyra lessons.

### **Suggestions**

Please continue to support musicians who wish to improve their skills in accompanying dance.

### **Plans to Share Information**

I have published a short article in SIFD News (the monthly newsletter of the Society for International Folk Dance) and am preparing a submission to 'Grapevine' the quarterly letter of the Circle Dance movement.

I have approached the SIFD about offering a workshop of Pontic dance with live musical accompaniment from me.

Michael Machin

### **The Project**

In July 2014 I visited Thessaloniki to learn as much as I could about playing Pontic Lyra for the accompaniment of dance. The main source of my learning was Kyriakos' Pontos Project, a comprehensive seminar on Pontic Dance and Culture organised by Kyriakos Moisidis. I also had a series of lyra lessons with Giorgos Poulantzaklis, a highly accomplished and respected lyra player and teacher.

In the Pontos Project we had daily dance sessions introducing us to families of dances from several regions of Pontos. (Pontos comprises a large region of the Black Sea coast of modern day Turkey from which hundreds of thousands of orthodox Christians were expelled during the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey following the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. Refugee families settled in many parts of Greece and founded Pontic Associations for the preservation of their cultural identity including their traditional forms of music and dance). Most of the dance teaching was by Kyriakos Moisidis but we also had sessions with guest teachers Kostas Alexandridis, Giorgos Kasambalidis and Nikos Zurnatsidis. In the afternoons there were presentations on a wide range of cultural topics eg. Pontian Music, Costume, Wedding Customs etc. Every evening we visited local villages or towns either to attend special events organised by the local Pontic Associations or local festivals. The wide ranging and beautifully thought out programme allowed us to experience Pontic dance in many different contexts. Thanks to Kyriakos' excellent skills in interviewing and interpreting we were also able to hear the direct testimony of several elderly Pontians about the establishment of their communities in Greece and the ways in which their music and dance had changed over the years.

The sessions with different dance teachers added considerably to our learning opportunities. Firstly we were given access to some highly specialist knowledge such as the dance-custom of 'Momoeri' presented by Professor Kostas Alexandridis. Secondly we were able to see how the different teachers worked with dancers. Nikos Zurnatzidis worked largely from the centre of the dance circle. In one dance I had the footwork the wrong way round and he communicated this to me with hand signals. By contrast Giorgos Kasamblidis moved around the circle, going in next to dancers who needed correcting and moving on elsewhere once they had the steps. In his evening presentation he stressed the importance of unity in Pontic dance. Unlike other forms of traditional Greek dance where an open circle has a clear leader who may well perform some extravagant figures, in Pontic dance the circle is often closed and there is no one dancer who stands out from the rest.

Happily for me there were skilled lyra players everywhere we went and we danced to live music every night. I was able to observe directly how the instrument is used today by many different players and I was also able to hear accounts of how the instrument was used in the past. Finally by taking lessons with Giorgos Poulantzaklis my learning was fleshed out by the additional insights of a master musician.

So, what did I learn? It's no surprise that one of the central requirements of Pontic dance music is rhythm. It's a pretty obvious thing to say but a really good way of learning the required rhythm is first to learn the dance. In my lessons with Giorgos we concentrated on songs for the dances Dipat, Tik and Omal. In the dance sessions variations from all of these dance families came up time and again, and all were

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danced at length at every festival or party we attended. The constant repetition of dances each day fed into my learning of different songs for them.

### Playing in Nea Trapezounda



Photo by Lenka Harmon

Knowing the rhythms for the dances is a necessary first step but how does the lyra player get them across? The crucial factor here is bowing technique and in my case this meant unlearning some bad habits I'd got into by transferring violin bowing technique onto the lyra. On the violin (my main instrument) the instrument is maintained in a relatively stable plane and the bow moves from one string to another by moving the bowing arm from the right shoulder. My attempts to reproduce this on the lyra resulted in very uneven rhythm, particularly when it was necessary to cross strings. The design and playing position of the lyra are different from the violin (the photo above shows how the lyra is held vertically from the left hand and when the player is seated it rests on the thigh) and fast string changes are achieved by keeping the bow in a constant plane and turning the lyra just far enough by flexing or extending the left wrist.

Another important piece of lyra technique, especially if there is no drum, is foot percussion. Tapping out the beats with the feet is a familiar action of fiddle players the world over. In French-Canadian fiddle music complex rhythms are created from tapping patterns using both feet. In Swedish fiddle music it is usual to use foot percussion to tap on the beats which are important for the dance rhythm. Similarly in Pontic music foot percussion is used to reinforce the underlying rhythm of the dance. I was very honoured to be asked to play something at a festival in Nea Trapezounda (see photo above) and when I had finished the bespectacled man standing behind me advised me that, for the sake of the dancers, I must learn to tap my feet while playing.

The reinforcement of the dance rhythm by foot tapping is particularly important if the lyra player is the only musician. We experienced this in the session on dances from Matsouka taught by Giorgos Kasambalidis. Throughout this session the music was provided by Dimitis Triantafylidis, a young lyra player, and it was a magical experience to dance to the unamplified sound of just his lyra and voice. For me personally this session was inspirational. It provided me with a clear model of how I might share Pontic music back in the UK and demonstrated how it is perfectly possible to sustain a session of Pontic dance accompanied with acoustic lyra and

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voice. We had other similar experiences but it was much more usual for there to be both electronic amplification for the lyra and daouli(drum) accompaniment.

The availability of electronic amplification has transformed the use of the lyra everywhere it is played. At a special celebration in the village of Pontoeraklia we followed a group of dancers and musicians as they processed from house to house receiving lavish hospitality along the way. The two instruments were lyra and drum(daouli) and when we were behind the musicians only the drum was really audible.

### **Lyra and Daouli in Pontoeraklia**



When the procession paused to dance outside someone's house the lyra player would turn round and become audible again although still unequally matched with the daouli. Later on in the village square when four different dance groups all came together the lyra was plugged into a sound system and became the dominant instrument. During the period of processing round the village the lyra player supported his instrument with a fine metal chain hooked onto his belt. This gave him freedom to move around the dancers while he was playing and shout out encouragement as they danced. I also saw some lyra players who were able to do this while supporting the lyra just with the left hand and holding it out in front of them. This requires great skill and strength in the left hand.

A final, and perhaps also obvious, piece of learning is that there is no substitute for playing for dancers. Kyriakos kindly allowed me to play a couple of Dipat tunes in the final session of the seminar and despite my nervousness the dancers managed to find a rhythm to dance to.

### **Reflections on the Impact of the Journey**

I feel that my journey to Thessaloniki has impacted on me deeply as a person and as a musician. Previously my experience of playing lyra was all through self-teaching, attempting to copy from recordings, and using Youtube clips for role models. I had also learned a lot of Greek music from superb Greek musicians in seminars and workshops but always in the UK. This journey gave me my first opportunity to study the music and dance of Pontos within its cultural context and I now understand the

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immense additional benefits which this gives. At home I do not know any other lyra players. In the course of my journey I saw and met many, some of whom have become friends. At the many Pontic festivals and celebrations we visited, the lyra was not an exotic oddity but the main instrument to dance to. This meant I was able to hear and see many different players with a range of styles and techniques. At the same time as being immersed in Pontic culture at celebrations I was also learning dances in the daily classes and learning on the lyra in my lessons with Giorgos. The combination of these different elements made for an intense and rapid learning experience.

Another profoundly moving and affecting element of the journey was the sense of privileged access. On the evening of Monday 21<sup>st</sup> July we visited the village of Platanotopos and spent the entire evening dancing to the music of 93 year old Spyros Galetsidis. This remarkable old man who plays both lyra and zurna (a wind instrument requiring powerful breath control and skill) was a baby when his family made the journey from Pontos to Greece. He is one of the last of his generation of



musicians and carries within him the knowledge of traditional styles of playing and singing which date back to before the exchange of populations. He personally coached the singer Maria Kemenikidou in some of the songs we danced to so that we could hear the authentic style of the music as it had once been sung.

On the same evening we saw an elderly lady dance across the road to where Spyros was playing. Her ability to dance was curtailed by the effects of a recent hip operation and she had to use a walking stick and yet she was clearly dancing and waving her handkerchief with a grace and elegance acquired over many decades (she was in her eighties). For me this was a powerful demonstration of what dance can be and how it can remain accessible despite the effects of time on our bodies.

**Conclusions**

My journey has taught me the immense value of studying lyra in Greece and inspired me to return for further studies at the earliest opportunity. I also felt the benefits of working intensively with music and dance teachers in the same time period.

It has also inspired in me the desire to share what I have learned and in particular to try and provide dancers in the UK the chance to dance to live lyra music. The workshop session where we learned dances all with live lyra accompaniment was a personal highlight and an experience I wish very much to pass on to others. My lyra studies will continue and I hope soon to collaborate with dancing friends in the UK to offer live lyra music at an SIFD day course.

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