

Greek Aires and The 1821 War Relief

By Steve Frangos

Many Greek Americans still speak of the Greek War Relief programs of World War II. One often hears how famous Hollywood stars of the day such as Jack Benny would serve as hosts on special Greek War Relief radio programs. Throughout the 1940s, newsreels were shown in movie theaters all across the country — many owned by Greeks — featuring Hollywood stars, American political notables, and Greek American leaders marching with the Royal Evzones down New York City's Times Square.

What only a handful of the most dedicated of scholars recall is the first nationwide Greek War Relief drive in the United States of America. So thunderous was this response that it was called in the national press "the Grecian Fever." In 1821, when the Greeks raised the flag of freedom or death against the Ottomans the entire world reeled from the sound of their battle cry. In the clamor to aid the outnumbered Greeks a new American music was born, the Greek aire.

To Sing of Freedom, Boldly!

No one, today, really knows how many Greek aires were ever written. No comprehensive study exists of the Greek aires composed from 1821 until at least 1840. Few of the original composers, many of whom were recognized musicians of the day, have their Greek aires seriously examined by music historians. Added to this problem is the fact that



In the 19th century, the Greek War for Independence inspired many aires

Fretterless Thing by J.W. Hobbs, *Where Is My Loved One?* composed by Edward J. Loder and *Joy Is A Bird* by Charles W. Glover were all issued together and were an international sensation.

The "voice" of the *Captive Greek Girl* is heard not only in the lyrics but in a passage from the "Romance of the Harem" reproduced on the cover of the folio:

"Oh say not so!" tenderly exclaimed the slave: Who can controul (sic) the heart! The ocean waves are not bound even by the bands of iron: the sands of the desert cannot be steadied when the simoon is abroad even by the foundations of a city; how then can the affections be controuled (sic) or guided! The wild steed upon the mountain spurns the bit and the free spirit brooks no controul (sic). "...And without waiting u reply she burst at once into a gush of song whose melody swept through the chambers."

Song of the Greek Amazon composed by E. Ivés, Jr., merges the various classical and modern themes in a more military depiction of Greek womanhood. In the lyrics we learn of the fate of this young girl's betrothed:

"But they who slew him unaware, of coward murderers lurking nigh And left him to the fowls of air, Are yet alive and they must die!"

I buckle to my slender side the pistol and the scimitar. And in my maiden flow'r and pride, I come to share the tasks of war."

the original sheet music is now much prized as collectors' items, which makes direct access to a wide selection of these songs often extremely difficult.

Unexpectedly, the beauty of the lithography apparent on virtually any of these Greek aire song sheets also sets them apart for the musical scholar. Again this fact not only increases their monetary and historical value but once more adds to the difficulty of the most serious researcher from having direct access to original aires even at a public institution.

The reader must remember these aires were composed by American, and later northern European, musicians who had never heard authentic traditional Greek music. Whether these musicians thought these compositions sounded like real Greek music is for the moment unknown. What is certain, without a doubt, is that Greek aires were an instant popular success. By all published accounts from 1821 well into the 1840s it seems that Greek aires were among the most popular parlor and theater music in North America.

Dancing On a Greek Aire

While written and performed to honor the Greek War of 1821 these Greek aires were largely dance compositions. Based on the English "air," a term loosely used to mean a song or melody from roughly the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, the Greek aires soon took on a life of their own. The Greek aires were used both as dance-songs and to provide interludes between passages of accompanying recitation. The rhythmic freedom and fluid word setting characteristic of the genre allowed for this flexibility.

After March 25, 1821, these aires served as the theme music for the Greek Committee meetings that spread across America. In

(musician compositions).

spontaneous townhall meetings in Vermont, Michigan, Boston, New York and elsewhere these Greek Committees were formed essentially as aid societies to help in the Greek Cause. Lectures and speeches at rallies by prominent Americans rang out on behalf of the besieged Hellenes. And like the Second Greek War Relief in the 1940s these 1821-1839 meetings were also occasions for public entertainment in the forms of musical events, poetry recitals, and even the presentation of Greek plays.

For those occasions when the tone of the event was more serious the incorporation of a march theme into the aire was common. Two examples of this version of aire are *An Original Greek Aire* composed by W.C. Peters and the *Greek March of Liberty* by Charles Thibault. Elements of romance and the romantic are ever present in the Greek aires. We can note this even in W.C. Peters' march by virtue of the fact that it was composed and dedicated to a Miss Elizabeth Lucket.

When a more festive or even dramatic gathering was planned then the aires were either a popular dance as in *The Greek Ball*, a dance composed by R. L. Williams on February 14, 1824, or the more formal *Beauties of the Ballet* and *The Greek Romaika* written for the stage by the French musician A. Fleche.

As Captives and Combatants

The romance in these songs focuses on the virtues of war and Greek women. American and northern European artists frequently depicted the plight of the Greeks in the form of a young maiden. American sculptor Hiram Powers' internationally famous statue "The Greek Slave" and various European paintings all present the Greek Cause through the

feminine form.

The American composers presented Greek women in the only two roles they knew — as harem girls and warriors. In *Songs of the Captive Greek Girl* we hear of those young women who have suffered a fate worse than death. Based on the poetry from the "Romance of the Harem" by the English poet known only to history as Miss Pardoel at least four different aires were composed and issued together in one folio.

The first aire composed by W. Kuhe *The Captive Greek Girl* is a fantasia written for the piano forte. *Oh! The Heart Is A Free And*

Post-rmneneues

All these songs provide a wide array of largely still unexamined information on nineteenth-century American attitudes toward the modern Greeks. But why should we consider this nearly lost early American Republic musical genre?

Or what real purpose can such historical musings possibly serve? At a time when the very political existence of Greece is under assault it is critical for us to understand other times in American and World history when Greeks commanded unqualified respect and wide public admiration.

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