

# Liturgical Recordings On 78RPM

**By Steve Frangos**

TNH Staff Writer

**CHICAGO-** The history of the establishment of the Greek Orthodox Church in North America is without a doubt the core topic of the vast majority of all community publications.

Since the 1960s, the preservation movement among Greek-Americans has resulted in a virtual explosion of church histories, documentaries, the mounting of museum exhibitions, a virtual flood of auto/biographies, all of which is most often followed by the establishment of some form of historical society, genealogical group, church based archives and/or museums and/or online website.

This largely unexplored community based surge to preserve the history and experience of local communities has also extended itself to encompass historical research into the established of the wider Eastern Orthodox faith in the Western Hemisphere. Liturgical music as it developed in North America is a subset of these wider historical inquires.

Continued on page 7

# Of Saints and Singers: a Survey of Early

Continued from page 1

To assist in the establishment of a documented history of Greek Orthodox liturgical music I offer the following chronological survey of commercially recorded liturgical music inclusive of traditional calendar custom recordings.

The inclusion of calendar custom songs in any discussion of recorded liturgical music may, initially, seem out of place. However, in my discussions with elder Greek-Americans over the last thirty years, as to the use and occasions for which these early recordings were used, the replies always center on the lack of clergy to celebrate specific holidays. With no clergy these recordings were played with those gathered often singing along or at the very least maintaining silence until the end of the record. Calendar custom recordings were treated in the same manner as liturgical music with gatherings of extended family and friends and then the playing of these recorded songs. The simultaneous effort to both raise children as ethnic Greeks and to accommodate American holidays can be seen in these efforts.

#### FIRST RECORDINGS: 1916 TO 1920

While some accompanying documentation can be readily found for virtually every 78rpm record of early Greek Byzantine hymns, for the moment no detailed information about the lives of the performers or the circumstance surrounding the recordings of this music are, now, readily available. This absence of information includes all recordings whether those produced in the United States or those imported from abroad.

As far as can now be determined between 1916 and 1931, ten individual Greek singers or choral groups issued liturgical recordings in North America. All these early liturgical recording sessions took place at the Columbia or Victor main studios, located respectively, in either New York City or Camden, NJ. What is surprising to discover, even given the as yet sketchy nature of the documentation available, is that from the very first instance of issuing commercial recordings of Greek liturgical music the attempt was made to offer a systematic presentation of specific hymns and precise sections of the liturgy.

Marios Lyberopoulos, a tenor, was the first popular Greek male vocalist to regularly record in North America. This musician's career, as it appears on commercial records, was one that encompassed many traditional Greek genres as well as Greek language versions of contemporary American style ballads and even renditions of European romantic songs of the day. Compounding our interest in this first documented instance of

Greek liturgical music recorded in North America is the discovery that it was obviously a carefully planned program of music. For reasons, unknown to history this holiday schedule of hymns was recorded out of sequence. But obviously the time of year Lyberopoulos recorded these songs was meant to coincide with the Orthodox liturgical season.

The sequence begins sometime in May, 1916, when Kinonikon ke Telos tis Litourgias No.

Much about the early history of Greek recorded music is a mystery.

7 and Semoron Soterias imon to kefaleon, Christos Aneste No. 8 are both recorded as unaccompanied vocal performances (Columbia E3468). Lyberopoulos returned to the Columbia studios in the spring of 1917 to record Doxologia Part 1 and Doxologia Part 2 (Columbia E3465), Semaron Soterea To Kosmo-Tis Presvias No. 3 issued with Thefte Proskenisomen-Ayeos O Theos No. 4 (Columbia E3466) and finally Polechronon-Herouvikon No. 5 and Irinika-Epinikon Hymnon No. 6 (Columbia E3467). Not so complete a program of Greek liturgical music would be commercially recorded, again, for another twenty-nine years.

Greek immigrants to North America entered an urban secular world with a far different notion of time than the society

from which they left. Length of standard working hours and the observation (or lack) of seasonal events were as foreign to the newly arrived Greeks as the language. Greek calendar custom celebrations were a fundamental part of any viable community's round of annual events. Far from mere occasions for capricious license these holidays were joyous times when family relations and common fellowship were freely expressed.

This is how we can understand Lyberopoulos' recording on October 25, 1917 of the calendar custom song Xanthoula Apokreateko (Xanthoula Carnival). On this song Lyberopoulos is accompanied by the King Orchestra. American orchestras as much as laika companies can be found on these records. A case in point are Lyberopoulos' masterful renderings of Hrestooyena (Christmas) and Ageos Vaseles (St Basil) (Victor 72135) recorded on June 28, 1918, accompanied, this time, by Nathaniel Shilkret directing the Victor Talking Machine Company Orchestra. With Lyberopoulos we see the enduring pattern of all subsequent commercial recordings, e.g., Easter hymns on side A with songs from apokreas (pre-Lenten carnival), Christmas, and New Year being the supplement, B-side recording.

#### UNSOLVED MYSTERIES

Much about the very early period of Greek recorded music remains a deep mystery. A case in point can be found in the October 1918 Columbia Greek



Law Firm

G. Dimitriadis & Associates



Our company aims to provide high quality specific needs of our clients.

The main areas of our activities include:

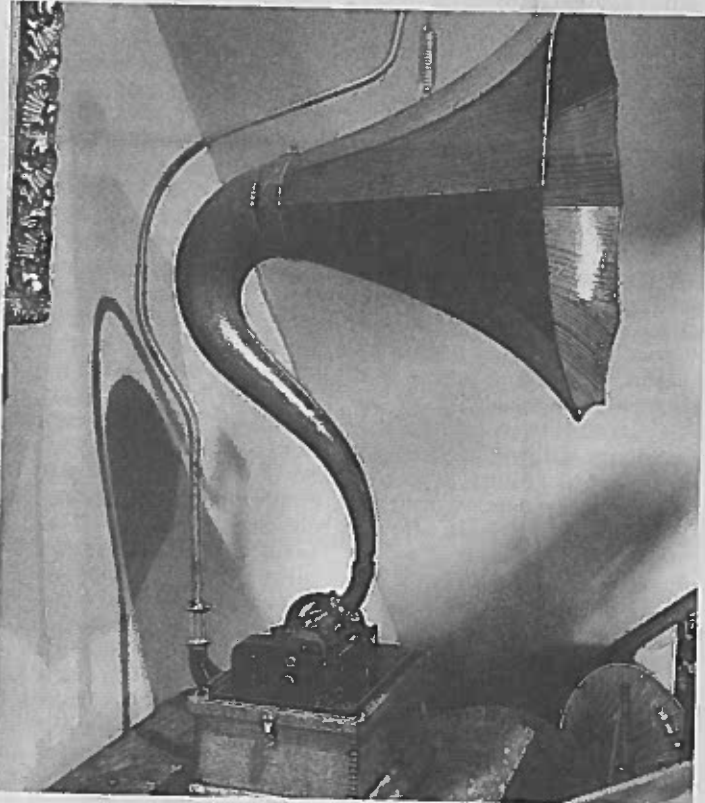
- Legal services
- Financial managerial services
- Real Estate

Our wide network of contacts in Greece guarantee unified handling of our clients' matters.

Phone: 01130 210 3390080 • Cell.: 01130 210 3390080  
Fax: 01130 210 3390080

e-mail: [info@dimitriadislaw.com](mailto:info@dimitriadislaw.com)  
[www.dimitriadislaw.com](http://www.dimitriadislaw.com)

# Greek Liturgical Recordings on 78RPM



Record Catalog, immediately after the listing for Marios Lyberopoulos' four records of hymns. Under the title "Religious Songs by other singers" is the Columbia record E6074 which features the two hymns: Axion estin. Sosen, Kyrie, ton Laon sou and Anastaseos imera Hristos Anesti. No vocalist or choir is cited.

Again, sometime in July 1919 a singer, known only as George Smyrneos, recorded one known record. Unaccompanied

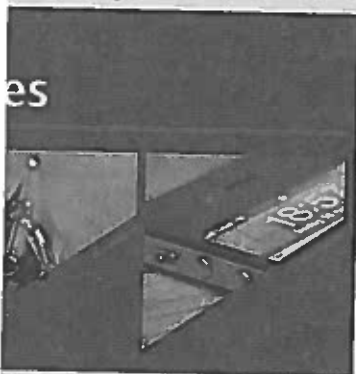
Smyrneos recorded I Genesis Sou Hriste: I Parthenos Simeron and En Iordani Baptizomenou: Epifanis Simeron Ti Ikoumeni (Columbia E4402). That a Greek immigrant vocalist would launch his career on strictly religious music is unprecedented.

We can be fairly certain the demand for Greek liturgical recordings were in increasing demand. This is clear, since between 1919 and 1920 the enormously popular George N. Helmis recorded seven hymns.

Sometime in December 1919, Helmis recorded Hristos Anesti/Easter Hymns and Pasca Hieron: Pasca To Terpon-Easter Hymns which was released on Columbia E4494. Then, in March 1920, Helmis returned to the Columbia studios to record Tin Ypsiloteran: Despoina Hai Miter; Alala Ta Heli Ton Asveon-Religious Song and Apostoli Ek Peraton; O Gluchasmos Ton Aggelon (Columbia E4633). Then, using all of his considerable skills as a traditional vocalist, Helmis recorded E Yennesis Sou Hriste-Christmas Hymn and E Parthenos Simeron-Christmas Hymn in July 1920 (Columbia E4777). Finally, at some time between 1918 and 1920, Helmis recorded O Angelos Evoa (Columbia E4967).

George Megas', Greek Calendar Customs, while presenting and describing the annual round of holiday celebrations takes considerable time to explain regional variation within the various traditions found among the Greeks (Athens: Rhodis Publications, 1964). Given the acute attention all Greek record producers gave to niche marketing this is a telling point to raise even without the ambiguous "religious song" or "Christmas hymn" titles that appear on these record labels. Clearly more systematic comparative research needs to be conducted before we can know exactly which version, of which region's songs, were first recorded in the United States.

[hellenenow1@yahoo.com](mailto:hellenenow1@yahoo.com)



services, adapted to the

arantees the immediate

130 6977 469888  
44

firm.gr  
rm.gr



## POCKET-LESS PITA BREAD

### Kontos Foods

The Leading Company in Flat Breads  
Well known for the Pocket-Less Pita

Manufacturers of Authentic Ethnic  
Hand Stretched Flat bread.

Kontos the first family in fillo dough and fillo products.

FILLO KATAIFI, BAKLAVA, SPANAKOPITA, TYROPITA  
NUT ROLL, MELOMAKARONA  
and the TRADITIONAL MEDITERRANEAN DESSERTS.  
Excellent quality and service.

We distribute in USA and Canada.  
Special prices for communities, schools, churches  
festivals and other events



Kontos Foods, Inc

Box 628, Paterson, NJ 07544

Tel: (973) 278-2800 Fax: (973) 278-7943

[Kontos.com](http://Kontos.com)