

Forgotten Sirens of Ameriki

ARY 8-14, 2011

By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

Between 1911 and 1929, only 32 Greek female vocalists are known to have performed on commercial records produced in the United States. Little is documented on the lives or careers of the vast majority of these women. For the moment, no one archive anywhere in the world, holds more than a fraction of the 673 songs these women recorded. Any discussion of the music these women have left must take into account that what little published information we find for these vocalists is literally all the documentation that now exists. In 1940 the United States Bureau of the Census counted 273,520 Greeks making them the 13th largest

Continued on page 5

For subscription:

718.784.5255

subscriptions@thenationalherald.com



The Forgotten Sirens of Ameriki: Earliest V

Continued from page 1

ethnic group in the country. That same year Greek records were fifth in total sales. It is generally accepted that the musical competition between Koula Antonopoulou and Maria Papagika ignited this unexpected surge in Greek record sales. But how, then, do the careers of all these other female vocalists fit into this wider historical picture?

We do not know the name of the first female vocalist to perform on a commercial record produced in North America. Existing documents only state that on January 16, 1911 in Columbia Record's New York City studios a "Greek Duet" recorded one song *Sevasou tin Aghapin Mau* (footnote spelling issue) that was accepted and released as Columbia Record E832. One unique early record features two female duets with three different vocalists. In June 1919, Kiria Paraskenoula on the song *Kamariera* accompanies Madame Koula in the first duet then on *Ton Kosmo Iho Varethi*, recorded sometime in October 1919, Paraskenoula sings with M. Theletridis (Panhellenion 7000.) There are no public documents on Paraskenoula. She was the only daughter of Koula and Andreas Antonopoulos. Koula had long wanted her only child to become a singer. As owners of Panhellenion Records, said to be the first Greek-owned record company in North America, the Antonopouloses made every effort to promote Paraskevi's career.

The memory of Paraskevi's only son, Xenophon Mitchell, not only identifies who Kiria Paraskenoula was but also the other two names under which she recorded. As *Vivis*, Paraskevi went on to record *Ela, Se Agapo, Agapis Logia* and *I Glentzedes* with Tetos Demetriades (Panhellenion 307 and 312). Later Paraskevi Antonopoulos recorded six more songs for Panhellenion under the name, Mme. Paraskevi.

Koula Antonopoulos and Paraskevi are the first mother and daughter duet found on Greek records produced in North America. Perhaps the only such duet for this early period. Given that Panhellenion Records was the first Greek-owned record company in North America Paraskevi was the first second-generation performer to ap-

pear on a family-owned label. Paraskevi was also the first female vocalist to sing with the legendary performer and eventually RCA Victor executive Tetos Demetriades. For a woman with only eight individual songs on commercial records these are none the less considerable accomplishments. With this information we can amend the existing published record and say that rather than 34 Greek female vocalists appearing on commercial records produced in North America from 1911 to 1929 as available documentation reports there are in fact only 32.

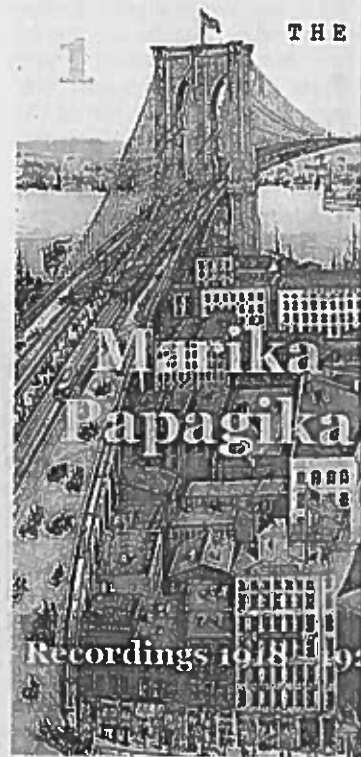
THE 1920'S SONGSTRESSES

The decade of the 1920's was the Golden Age of Greek female vocalists in Ameriki. Twice as many female vocalists recorded between 1920 and 1929 as appear on records produced in North America from 1911 to 1920. For the decade of the 1920's, record company documentation distinguishes between three distinct periods: the 1920's as an entire decade, the early 1920's, and then specific dates. B. Antonopoulou, Eleni Arapakis, Amalia Bakas (1929,) Maki Karneri (1928,) Mme. Kleonikis, Liza Kourouklis (1929,) Vyrsoula Pantopoulou (1928,) M. Theletrides. Kourouklis, was a well-known performer in Greek musical reviews that toured Ameriki. In that regard she is perhaps most vividly recalled performing with Giannakis Ioannadis not simply as a singing partner but as a comedian in stage farces of the early 1920's and 1930's. The only two songs Kourouklis recorded in the 1920's were *E Kapnistria* and *O Manavis kai e Doula* both for the Greek Record Company of Chicago. The instrumentalists for both songs were the two violinists Spiro Bekatoros and George Gretsris with Gregory Stone on piano. *E Kapnistria* features Kourouklis as the solo vocalist with Giannakis Ioannadis providing accompaniment on *O Manavis kai e Doula*.

Clearly, Kourouklis' theme song was *E Kapnistria*. This often recorded song frequently appears with the subtitle or alternative title of *To Sigaretto*. The surprising feminist tone of this song's lyrics inexplicably made this song an instant sensation.

E Kapnistria

*Arxisa fetu to sigaretto
Kai to travao mera kai nikta
san trelli*



There were numerous stars in the moment early in the 20th century.

*Pol Pol Ti glika pou tin evrika
Na me methani peio poli ki apo
fili.*

*Tabakiara krato opou pao
Kai to roufao
Ki olo lene san blepoume emena
Haritomena pou to krato.
Sta stiatoria kathome xoria
Kai molis fao to sigaro mou
krato,
Ki' an me kitoune ki' an me
gloune
Ego den blepo ki olo kano ton
stravo.*

*Tabakira krato opou pao...
Ki' an enas neos komposos ki
oraios
San mou prosferi ena tsigaro
mistika,
Xeri me xeri mou to prosferi
Kai to travoume kai e duo glika,
glika
Tabakira krato opou pao...
Ston andra m' eipa na mou vri
pippa
Kai kana pouira na travao kam-
mia fora,
Ki' o doleos klai ki olo mou leei
Dev stekun pouira se kali nikok-
era.*

Tabakira krato opou pao...
Apparently due to the success of this record in January 1928, Kourouklis was invited to the Columbia Record studios to perform *To Sigaretto*. This recording was a huge popular and financial success. Still, for reasons yet unknown to history Kourouklis never went on to be-

Voices Echo in Recordings and Memory

GREEK SONG IN USA



TNH ARCHIVES

the Greek American musical firm, like Marika Papagika.

come as popular a recording star as she was a music hall performer.

In August 1984, I spoke with Mrs. Rita Demetriades, a singer from 1928 and Tetos Demetriades, second wife. I learned that Tassia Demetriades was Tetos Demetriades' sister. Vera was Tetos Demetriades' first wife, an American songstress of Irish descent, who passed away in the 1930's. On June 14, 1927, Tassia recorded with Tetos her first two duets *Stin Amouthia* a *kantada* and *Poso Seho Sympathisi*, a tango. Far from traditional music, these songs were *ala franka* style or Westernized songs. The musical accompaniment certainly underlines this point with the accompaniment of Eftemios Keros and His Hawaiian Guitars. During this same June 14th recording session Tassia, Christos Demetrapoulos and Tetos also recorded *Oso Girizi I Sfera*.

One Columbia record features all three Demetriades. First we hear Tassia, only one month after her first record, singing a duet with Vera on *Pane Elpides*. On the flip-side with *Mes' Sti Flogia Tou Glentiou* we hear Tassia and Tetos along with a chorus. Again, Eftemios Keros and his Hawaiian Guitars provide the musical accompaniment for both sides.

On September 26, 1927, Tassia recorded a very well received version of *To Cigaretto*. However not every performance was a success. Tassia's next record does not feature her singing voice at all. On August 25, 1927, Tassia and George Maraveas performed together on the Greek version of an old commercial record theme, a record that just features laughing. The aptly entitled *Laughing Record* was ultimately rejected by company executives and never released. Tassia was not dismayed by this failure since on September 26, 1927 she successfully recorded *Manavis Ke Doula* with Tetos. As part of all their frantic studio work Tetos recorded with Tassia one of the all-time comedy song classics, *E Banana Eine Frouto Glyko* sometime in 1927, for Columbia.

On January 25, 1928, as part of the chorus Tassia sings with Nontas Kontogeorge, Christos Demetrapoulos, and Tetos on the song *An S'Agapo To Xevris*. Finally on April 30, 1928, Tassia entered the Victor Record Company's studios to record two songs *To Moro Mou* and *Ti Geneka Pou Skotoni*. This is the last record on which Demetriades appeared. There is much about the history of Greek music in North America that remains a mystery. Who were these women? Did they achieve everything they wanted in their careers? Were there other Greek female vocalists who recorded in North America between 1919 and 1929?

MEMORIES ARE MADE OF THIS

It was a typical birthday party at a *yiayia's* house during the 1950's. Tables with colored printed-paper were set and fluttering outside in the backyard for the kids. Adults were seated in the dining room with a pristine white table cloth, fancy-folded white napkins in the center of each plate, the silver and the good china (with the gold leafing, in a Greek key, around the edges) at each setting. The little girls were in frilly white dresses that puffed out around their knees. The boys, at first, wore blazers, white shirts and ties but they quickly lost their ties and jackets as they wrestled with each other and then as they chased the girls. After the singing of *Happy Birthday* and all the photographs the young mothers gradually herded the children outside so that the old people could drink their coffee

in peace. Koula Antonopoulou attended this party. It was at a close friend's house only three doors down from Koula's Bay Ridge, Brooklyn home. Koula had just returned from her latest engagement in the Catskill Mountains. It was much earlier in the season than she would normally have returned. Koula was experiencing far more difficulties with her health than she admitted to her lady friends that afternoon.

It was a fine day. After a few hours things quieted down. The children were here and there. Some still playing while others had fallen asleep in the lap of a Papou or on the blanket next to their mother where the young women sat together talking in the backyard. One of the young mothers convinced all the old people to come outside and enjoy the weather. In their folding chairs and around the scattered card tables one memory led to another.

Somehow the topic was brought up that Koula had sung for the Greek troops in the hospital camps during the Balkan Wars. As Koula made light of it, someone asked if she would not sing for them now. The little girl whose birthday was being celebrated was sitting next to her *yiayia* who was next to Koula. The girl was the very same age as Koula's own granddaughter Daphne. The child had been gathering flowers from the surrounding garden and in all the attention being paid to the fabled singer she shyly handed one to Koula. Vivi Antonopoulos, who had stayed at home, heard her mother singing and panicked. Still wearing her apron and house slippers Vivi ran outside. Even as she hurried down the alley Vivi couldn't help realizing that her mother was singing as she had not heard her sing in years. Just as Koula finished Vivi came through the backyard gate. The small gathering of adults burst into applause; the men raising their glasses in a toast. Gathering her arm Vivi started to scold her mother especially after all the warnings the doctors had given. Koula turned, the applause and calls of praise all around her, and said, "Ach, finally got it out, again, I sang!" Koula Antonopoulou died that night. The flowers given her, by all the children, after this last performance in a vase next to her bed. A siren had ceased.