

# Portraits In Modern Greek Music: Rosa Eskenazi



diana University in Bloomington, Indiana, is one place that early Balkan and Anatolian music can be found. The Archive has a large collection of interviews with and/or musical examples by individual Armenian, Greek, Gypsy, Ladino, Macedonian, and Turkish-traditional musicians. As far as commercial records are concerned, there are over five hundred 78s records in the Greek Family Record Collection (#89-050-C/F) and another two hundred commercial 78s records are held in the Liberty Record Company Collection (#89-182-C). Besides the two above, I know of no other public archive in the United States that holds Greek and Turkish commercial records.

While researchers may discover discographies documenting the careers of a host of Balkan and Anatolian musicians in Richard Keith Spottswood's classic seven volume discography *Ethnic Music On Records: A Discography of Ethnic Recordings Produced in the United States from 1894-1942*, they will not find a single song cited for Rosa Eskenazi. Moreover, no imported 78s records are cited in Spottswood, only American produced and issued records. Eskenazi did visit, perform, and record in America, but not prior to 1942.

Today, Eskenazi is recognized as having been the premier female vocalist of the cafe aman style. She recorded her most memorable songs with her *compania* of Demetrios Semsis on violin and Agapios Toumbolis on oud. This musical style developed in the late 1800s in the coastal cities of Athens, Constantinople, and Smyrna, from which the music's name is derived.

accompaniment of Semsis and Toumbolis, that the majority of writers on music from the Balkans and Anatolia consider her performances as typifying the finest expression of the cafe aman style ever placed on commercial records.

Eskenazi's legacy of recorded music is an amazing body of work with virtuoso performances in a dazzling array of musical genres and languages, all of which are traditional to the Balkans and Anatolia. On many of the available commercial records, Eskenazi not only sings in Greek but also in Ladino, Turkish and Kurdish as well.

While there is presently no way to know exactly how many records by Eskenazi were released in the United States, it is safe to say that approximately one hundred and fifty to two hundred and fifty songs were recorded. As popular as Eskenazi may have been, no discographies exist for Balkan and Anatolian commercial records produced outside the U.S.

We know that Eskenazi visited America after World War II, but there are no reliable written accounts, excepting Hatzidoulis's interviews, that I am aware of that describe these visits in any detail. However, there are commercial records from the postWorld War II era that attest to Eskenazi's presence in the U.S.

One such recording is *Ellinopoulos Ormorfes*, which is set to a kalamatianos dance rhythm. The performers listed on the album are Rosa Eskenazi as vocalist, Kostas Gadinis on the clarinet and N. Pourporaki as the orchestra leader (Kalos Diskos Records 306A). There is a need to establish a discog-





Demetrios Semsis, Agapios Toumboulis, and Rosa Eskenazi.

### By Steve Frangos

**A**lthough Rosa Eskenazi (circa 1900-1980) was unquestionably one of the most popular female vocalists in modern Greek music, there remains little documentation about her life and long career. None of the existing published accounts concur about even the smallest details of her life. The single fact upon which all accounts do agree is that Eskenazi was born in the Ottoman Empire to a Jewish family. It is generally believed that Eskenazi, at a very young age, began her career as a dancer and defi player in what has become known as the Greek cafe music scene. In the Constantinople cafe amans, Eskenazi soon became one of the premier singers in, what writers today call, the Smyrnaic-Rebetic tradition of Greek song and dance. I am being cautious about specific terms since Eskenazi performed at a time when the peoples and cultures of the Ottoman Empire shared a common but exceedingly complex musical and performance art tradition.

Originally one of the most sought after female vocalists, the musical legacy left behind by Eskenazi can today only be found on a handful of re-released albums issued in Greece and America, in private family collections, and in the few American and European archival collections that hold Greek and Balkan 78s records.

The only written account of Eskenazi's

thoughts about her career and life are found in a series of interviews between Eskenazi and Kostas Hatzidoulis entitled *Auta Pou Thimamai* (That Which I Remember), which were reprinted in Athens in 1982. The dialogue is noteworthy for her recollections about specific events and performances. Especially interesting are the photographs of Eskenazi in the United States after the World War II. On many occasions, I have been told that magazine articles and essays in small journals have appeared in Greece over the years on the singer's life and career.

Aside from re-released albums available in Greece featuring individual songs by Eskenazi, the most impressive album containing her work is an American record produced by Martin Schwartz entitled *Greek-Oriental Smyrnaic-Rebetic Songs and Dances. The Golden Years: 1927-1937* (Folklyric Records 9033). This album includes two of Eskenazi's most popular songs: *Usak Tsifie-Tell Manes* and *Trava Re Alani*.

Regrettably, Schwartz's disc is also a perfect example of the lack of direct public access to the early musical traditions of the Balkans and Anatolia. Drawn from the private collections of various individuals, an interested researcher or music lover would be hard pressed to make any investigations regarding the music found on Greek-Oriental Smyrnaic-Rebetic Songs and Dances. This fact inevitably leads to the question: Where can such music be found?

The Archives of Traditional Music at In-

It should be emphasized that Eskenazi and her contemporaries learned and performed their music during the waning days of the Ottoman Empire. This complex, multi-cultural music world consisted of Armenian, Greek, Gypsy, Jewish and Turkish musicians. It is a tribute to Eskenazi's skill as a vocalist, along with the inspired instrumental

raphy in modern Greek music, so that all the music produced from 1890 to 1965 can finally be reckoned with as it was experienced by musicians and audiences at that time. More important, a discography would aid in the preservation and research of the musical traditions of performers like Eskenazi and her contemporaries.

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