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SINGING 'WITHOUT' COMPANY?  
MULTIPART MUSIC OF THE IONIAN ISLANDS  
IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC

ABSTRACT

Dall'inizio del 2020, le restrizioni da COVID-19 hanno vietato qualsiasi attività di canto corale e, in generale, le pratiche musicali mediante le quali le persone erano solite riunirsi per trascorrere del tempo insieme. Di conseguenza, anche nelle Isole Ionie, le pratiche di canto ad accordo sono state interrotte per tutto il periodo di lockdown. Negli anni 2020-2022 gli abitanti di queste isole non sono riusciti a far fronte al distanziamento né a riunirsi attraverso attività musicali online, eccezion fatta per quelle scolastiche. Nell'estate del 2021, durante il lavoro sul campo, sia per me come ricercatore che per loro come interpreti, è stata la prima occasione dopo i vari periodi di lockdown per potersi riunire nuovamente, per cantare in compagnia. L'indagine è proseguita anche a distanza, grazie all'impiego dell'etnografia ibrida; questo articolo è la prima occasione per mostrare i risultati di questo particolare aspetto della mia ricerca.

PAROLE CHIAVE canto ad accordo, cantare in tavola, Isole Ionie, lockdown, COVID-19

SUMMARY

Since 2020, COVID-19 restrictions have forbidden any activity of choral singing and, more generally, musical practices through which people used to gather in the same place to enjoy their time together. As a result, also in the Ionian Islands multipart musical practices came to a halt for the entire lockdown periods. In the years 2020-2022 people from these islands did not manage to cope with social distancing nor gathering via online musical activities, apart from school ones. In the summer of 2021, during a fieldwork, both for me as a researcher and for them as performers, it was the first chance after the various periods of lockdowns to be able to come together again, to sing in 'real' company. The investigation continued remotely, thanks to the use of digital ethnography, and this article is the first opportunity to comprehensively show the results of this specific aspect of my research.

KEYWORDS multipart singing, singing in company, Ionian Islands, lockdown, COVID-19



## 1. Introduction

THIS contribution concerns the study of multipart musical practices in the Ionian Islands of Corfu, Kefalonia, and Zakynthos (Greece), a subject that has never been extensively investigated by ethnomusicological scholarship. Even Greek musicological research has not paid attention to the repertoires or musical practices of these islands, apart from some studies that have so far mostly revolved around the spread of Italian opera in Corfu between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries,<sup>1</sup> and the very recent article by Zoe Dionyssiou, although it deals exclusively with the choral singing of the female ensemble called *Androniki* in the small village of Kato Garounas in the northern part of Corfu island.<sup>2</sup>

These musical practices are mainly represented by the urban repertoire of the *kandadhes*<sup>3</sup> (widespread on all three islands), the *arekies* of Zakynthos and the *ariettes* of Kefalonia, as well as the ecclesiastical chant repertoire; all these are repertoires characterised by a homophonic ‘chordal’ idiom, developed *a orecchio* by two, three or four vocal parts, making chords in second inversion (always in the major scale), based on the tonal system, in contrast to the modal one spread in the rest of Greece.

Since 2020, COVID-19 restrictions have forbidden any activity of choral singing and, more generally, musical practices through which people used to gather in the same place to enjoy their time together. As a result, also in the Ionian Islands musical practices came to a halt for the entire lockdown periods. Following a partial temporary reopening of group activities in Greece during the pandemic (between June and September 2021), these islands were subjects of my ethnomusicological fieldwork. As a matter of fact, in the years 2020-2022 people from these islands did not manage to cope with social distancing nor gathering via online musical activities, apart from school ones.<sup>4</sup>

1. KARDAMIS, *Nobile Teatro*; KARDAMIS, *Music in the Ionian Islands*; KARDAMIS, *From popular to Esoteric*; KARDAMIS, *Music Migration*; ROMANOU, *Ένα αρχείο*; ROMANOU, *Italian Musicians in Greece*; ROMANOU, *Westernization of Greek music*; ROMANOU, *Η μουσική βιβλιοθήκη*; ROMANOU, *The Ionian Islands*.
2. DIONYSSIOU, *The transformation*.
3. Greek terms in this work are indicated in italics when transliterated (e.g., *kandadha*, *arekia*, etc.). The sounds θ and υ are indicated with *th* and *i*, sometimes *y*, while φ and β are indicated with *f* and *v*, respectively; the same happens in the case of the sounds ξ and ψ, indicated as *x* and *ps*. For the transcription of the Greek texts, the transcription *u* for the Greek diphthong *ou* was considered to be adopted; the transcription *k*, *g*, *ch* for κ, γ, χ followed by phoneme *a*, *o*, *u*; the transcription *j* for γ followed by phoneme *e*, *i*; the transcription *dh* for the spirant δ; *d* for ντ, etc. Moreover, the songs I collected were analysed through transcription, transliteration (according to the norms of Italian phonetics) and translation of the texts. All translations from Greek included in this paper are mine.
4. This is for instance the case of the Corfu Children’s Choir, which will be mentioned later (cfr. footnote no. 20); the conductor Christina Kalliaridou organised some online rehearsal sessions, as has happened in many other documented and investigated cases of choral singing around the world. In fact, as reported in an article dated 10 April 2020 on the webpage of the weekly online newspaper *Ενημέρωση* (<https://enimerosi.com/article/43292/>) «the children are staying home in accordance with the Civil Protection guidelines but technology allowed them to join their voices again online». See also: <https://www.youtube>.

Therefore, when I found myself in the field in the summer of 2021, both for me as a researcher and for them as performers, it was the first chance after the various periods of lockdown to be able to come together again, to make music in 'real' company. The study continued remotely, thanks to the use of digital ethnography, and here I thoroughly show the results of this specific aspect of my research.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. COVID Disaster: The Absence of 'Concord'

Unfortunately, we haven't sung together for the past two years...<sup>6</sup>

In this paragraph I will focus on some challenges experienced by performers in the Ionian Islands, who could not gather due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

Since March 2020, in Greece, as elsewhere, measures have been taken at local level, including the closure of schools and the interruption of cultural events in the affected areas, as well as the shutdown of all cafes, bars, museums, shops, and restaurants in the country. Furthermore, Greek authorities had announced restrictions on all non-essential travel across the country. As a matter of fact, the measures applied in Greece were among the strictest in Europe and were credited internationally with slowing the spread of the coronavirus and keeping the number of deaths among the lowest in Europe.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, between the years 2020 and 2021, more than one million cases and nearly twenty thousand deaths have been recorded in Greece across the country. Among the three Ionian islands, Zakynthos, was the one most affected by the spread of the virus.

[com/watch?v=CxCNk0CANIM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxCNk0CANIM), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgHkNPMWnsl>, and the case of the Corfu Female Choir, also conducted by Kalliaridou, an interesting case which, for reasons of brevity, will not be dealt with here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AT\\_FPCxO4Do](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AT_FPCxO4Do). In early summer 2021, when there was a temporary easing of government sanitary measures, the Children's Choir resumed meeting in person but in the outdoors. Although it is possible to read a comprehensive scientific literature about 'music and pandemic', and particularly on multipart singing practices during the pandemic, for the sake of brevity here I only refer to LUTZU – MACCHIARELLA, *Sardinian Traditional Music*, especially pp. 125-129; to mention another case study, on the online transfer of Sacred Harp singing practices cfr. MORGAN-ELLIS, *Like Pieces* and DATTILO, *Changes and Chances*. Further insights can be accessed on the webpage <https://www.aesthetics.mpg.de/en/research/departement-of-music/musicovid-an-international-research-network.html>, that is a global and interdisciplinary network of researchers and musicians formed to support and facilitate research across the globe on the role of music during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. The audio-visual materials of my field research carried out in the Ionian Islands have been collected in the multimedia database *Eptànisa* (<https://www.eptanisa.it/>) that I implemented.
6. Notes from fieldwork in the Ionian Islands, 2021.
7. TUGWELL – NIKAS, *Humbled Greeks*.

The tourism sector also suffered from the effects of the pandemic. In the pre-COVID period, particularly in 2019, Greece had a record of 31 million tourists. During the ‘COVID biennium’ (i.e. 2020-21), between 7 and 15 million tourists were recorded, while as of summer 2022 the trend seems to have returned to pre-pandemic rates.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, from June to September 2021, namely within a time window of semi-freedom from the strong pandemic lockdowns, I was able to set off for conducting my fieldwork.

Before going in depth with the issue of challenges experienced by interpreters of musical practices in the Ionian Islands, I would like first to offer some remarks on the concept of *kurdhisma*, i.e. the term by which Ionian performers understand their own action of singing in company.

Sometimes, in the course of an interview, I happened to ask my interlocutor to sing his/her part of a song individually, and the answer was always the same: «I can’t, I need the *parea*», i.e. the ‘company’, like saying ‘I need the co-participation of the other voices’, because, as in the case of other musical practices of chordal singing, performers «do not conceive of a polyphonic chant line without the person who is performing it»,<sup>9</sup> and this is because it is not an abstract concatenation of chords but «a collectively coordinated action between sound bodies: during the performance, each performer is the sound he or she produces, so that the music making gives individuals distinctive opportunities to manifest themselves».<sup>10</sup>

Talking about *kurdhisma* thus means observing the way the singing protagonists stay together, their way of making music together, evaluating the empathy that is created between them, since the performance contexts themselves and the actions of the performers that occur in them are not dissociated from the musical sphere, as they are fully part of singing and the very experience of singing ‘together’.<sup>11</sup> This particular point of view, therefore, redefines the contours of our observation of musical practices, since «sound production is not the result of musical creation in an absolute sense, nor does it refer to an abstract variability envisaged and acquired by the ‘tradition’ of a place, of a community»,<sup>12</sup> but is a performing action within which

encounters (sometimes even conflicts) and interactions (possibly including challenges, provocations, etc.) take place between people in the flesh. The sound outcome of a performance is thus a result of interpersonal relations and is essentially unpredictable, just as is generally the case with every act of making together among several individuals: each singer can imagine and plan his vocal delivery with reference to the individuality of those interacting with him.<sup>13</sup>

8. Web source: <https://mintour.gov.gr>.

9. MACCHIARELLA, *Estetiche negoziate*, p. 248.

10. MACCHIARELLA, *For Those who Have Ears to Hear*, p. 98.

11. MACCHIARELLA, *Estetiche negoziate*, p. 249.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

13. *Ibid.*

A term employed by Ignazio Macchiarella in one of his studies on Sardinian multipart music, namely 'amalgam',<sup>14</sup> proves quite appropriate to define the Ionian *kurdhisma* as well. At the same time, this concept can be associated with the term 'concord', as used by Lortat-Jacob to refer to the practice of multipart singing 'in company':

[...] singing in company would amount to focusing on an action fundamentally linked to a certain pleasure caused or brought about by singing. In the relevant case, singing essentially means singing together and that this practice is consubstantially linked to the notion of concord, a notion which comes in a variety of forms [...]. Even if there are several ways of making music together, no type of polyphonic singing is an exception to this rule of concord, in the wider meaning of the term. And this musical concord is first and foremost social: for the singer-protagonists who are conscious of the group they form, the resulting sound always conveys a certain way of being together.<sup>15</sup>

The action of singing together is thus connected to the very pleasure of enjoying the company one is part of, an enjoyment linked to the practice of singing as such. The notion of 'concord' expressed by Lortat-Jacob – which I propose here to connect to the *kurdhisma* of the Ionian Islands – could thus be understood as an unwritten rule of which no type of polyphonic singing could do without, precisely because, first and foremost, it is a «social concord»,<sup>16</sup> and, at the same time, a certain «mode of being together».<sup>17</sup>

As is well known, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused great unease and a major obstacle to the continuation of these practices of togetherness.

In this disastrous atmosphere of the absence of 'concord', or rather *kurdhisma* in this case, I repeatedly heard the same sentence said by the several people I met during the fieldwork: «Unfortunately, we haven't sung together for the past two years...».

For instance, there have actually been several cases of interruption of musical practices in Corfu for almost two years. One of these, is that of Kato Garounas, where the village's cultural association, the *Politistikos Syllogos Kato Garouna* – already active since at least 1960 – offers instrumental and church music courses for children, and actively participates in festivals and public events held on the island and in the rest of Greece, occasions in which the *Androniki* Choir can perform in concert.

Kato Garounas' practice of multipart singing is very similar to other manifestations relevant to other island musical practices: a soloist or first voice (in Greek, *proti*) starts the singing and the others – usually 1 or 2 vocal parts – enter within the chord at some point during the performance of the first verse

14. *Ibid.*, p. 253; MACCHIARELLA, *It is a Matter of Amalgam*.

15. LORTAT-JACOB, *Singing in Company*, p. 26.

16. *Ibid.*

17. LORTAT-JACOB, *Ditelo con i fiori*, p. 55.



Figure 1. Some women singing in the choir *Androniki*, Kato Garounas (Corfu), 19.09.2021

of the text or near its cadence. The repertoire of the *Androniki* choir includes love songs, rural songs, and, above all, work songs: e.g. the olive harvest song, *Kaliòra nà 'chun i eliès* ([Video 1](#)), the only example found in the whole of the Heptanese or, at any rate, in the three islands I investigated far and wide.

Verbal text in Greek:

Καλήώρα νά 'χουν οι ελιές που κάνουνε το λάδι,  
να φέγγει τση αγάπης μου για να κεντάει το βράδυ.  
Τώρα που σώσαμε τσ' ελιές και μπήκαμε στο θέρο[ς],  
τώρα, αγάπη μου γλυκιά, καδήνα θα σου φέρω.

Transliteration and development of the text according to the musical structure:

*Kaliòra nà 'chun i eliès pu kànune to làdhi, | pu kànune to làdhi, |*  
*na feggghi tsi agàpis mou ja na kendài to vràdhi | ja na kendài to vràdhi |*  
*Tora pu sòsame ts' eliès kie bikame sto thèro[s], | kie bikame sto thèro[s], |*  
*tora, agàpi mu glikià, kadhìna tha su fèro. | kadhìna tha su fèro.*

Translation:

May the olives have good luck and may the oil come,  
to illuminate my beauty who embroiders in the evening.  
When we have stored up the olives and come into summer [i.e. harvest],  
then, my sweet love, I will bring you a beautiful chain [of gold].

Through these choral singing practices, the ladies of Kato Garounas revive songs and poetic texts 'from the past', in order to firmly state their identity as women and performers of the songs of their own village. They are in

fact proud of this, and by observing their ideas and concepts, in their words, glances, and gestures, one could try to isolate and comprehend in depth the «characteristics of representation», and the elements marking the appearance of this presumed identity.<sup>18</sup>

In the course of my first investigation in Kato Garounas (4 July 2021), I met and interviewed Kassiani Skolariki (1970-), president of the cultural association of the village. She also acts as the representative of the village's women's choir *Androniki*; during our conversation she complained that they hadn't been able to schedule all activities (concerts, cultural events) that year – as they do every year – due to the coronavirus pandemic. Fortunately, I was able to record some singing and dancing, and the ladies were happy because they met in such large numbers after more than a year, to sing together.

During my research, at the Centre of Ionian Music and Culture in Corfu town, I had the opportunity to meet the four *kandadhori* (i.e. traditional singers) mentioned in an article written by Jakša Primorac,<sup>19</sup> in which we read a short comparative contribution between two songs from the Ionian Islands, two from the so-called *Quattro Province* and two Croatian songs.

The four *kandadhori* are part of the vocal ensemble *T'argastiri*, named after the 'argastiri' a place (like a tavern) where the men of Corfu once gathered to drink and sing together. The group of singers I interviewed, an ensemble active since the early 1980s, today consists of four men (Figure 2).

During two interviews (30 June and 16 September 2021), the singers of *T'argastiri* performed pieces from their concert repertoire, specifically, from 'concert' because they are an ensemble organised to perform in concert settings, to perform at a community staged event, so this one is really a case of 'presentational performance'.

The second time I interviewed the ensemble (16 September 2021), they felt more comfortable performing many more songs than the first time, since at that time they hadn't met for so long because of the COVID-19 pandemic, so they didn't «feel very prepared» then, as they said.

The song presented here is entitled *Jati feggàri mu lambrò* ([Video 2](#)), transmitted in the central part of the island; according to Jorgos Anifantis,<sup>20</sup> it was sung at night by groups of 'moonlight singers' and was mainly played in the

18. CARLE, *Dinamiche identitarie*, p. 42.

19. PRIMORAC, *The Sailors' Chord*.

20. Jorgos Anifantis (*primos*) is the main voice of the ensemble and, as can be seen in the video, conducts the other singers. The video recording was made at a special location, for which further information would be appropriate. The choral ensemble *T'argastiri*, together with the Men's Choir (in Greek, *Andriki Chorodhia*) and the Children's Choir (in Greek, *Pedhiki Chorodhia*), gathers and performs at the Centre of Heptanesian Music and Culture of Corfu (in Greek, *Kendro Eptanisiakis Musikis kie Politismù*), between the neighbourhood of Garitsa and Mon Repos, and concern an interesting case of revival and music education through the transmission of traditional repertoire. The Centre was founded in 2018 by the Men's Choir, in a building granted by the Greek State. Spyros Mexas (*varitonos*) was among the main promoters of this operation and is now its president. As part of its activities, the 'School of Music' was established, recognised by the Ministry of Culture, where singing, music theory, piano, violin, guitar and mandolin are taught by renowned local teachers.



Figure 2. From left to right, Jorgos Anifantis (1947-) (*primos*), Prokopis Kafarakis (*sekondos*) (1955-), Spyros Mexas (1951-) (*varitonos*) and Alexandros Skouras (1946-) (*basos*). [The names of the vocal parts refer to numeral adjectives borrowing Italian terms, from the highest to the lowest voice. *Primos* and *sekondos* sing in the tenor vocal range, the *varitonos* in that of the baritone, and the *basos* in that of the bass.]

village of Kynopiastes (approximately 10 km south-west of Corfu Town).

Verbal text in Greek:

Γιατί φεγγάρι μου λαμπρό απόψε  
ρίχνεις τις αργυρές σου τις ακτίνες;  
Δεν το 'λπιζα ποτέ να πουν κακό για μένα  
τα δυο σου χείλη τα ερωτευμένα.

Transliteration and development of the text according to the musical structure:

*Jati feggari mu lambrò apòpse*  
*richnis tis arghirès su tis aktines?*  
*Dhen tò 'lpiza potè na pun kakò ja mena*  
*ta dhiò su chili ta erotevmèna.*  
*Dhen tò 'lpiza potè na pun kakò ja mena*  
*ta dhiò su chili ta erotevmèna.*

Translation:

Why, my shining moon, tonight  
do you let fall your silver rays?  
I never thought that your two lips in love



would speak against me.  
 I never thought that your two lips in love  
 would speak against me.

This song is defined by its performers as a serenade (in Greek *serenada*), a *nichtodhia* or 'night song'; it is about a dialogue with the moon, which is one of the most recurrent topics in this kind of repertoire. According to them, these kinds of Corfiot songs are more 'lyrical' (meaning romantic) than the Zakynthian *arekies*, where the voices are more «*sklires, dhinamikes*» (that could be translated as 'intense', 'strong'). This tells us something about their perception and awareness of their songs, their local singing style and the symbolic representation of their insular identity. Three islands, with common characteristics but each with individual features.

Jorgos Anifantis concluded our last meeting by saying: «singing, first of all, means being together»;<sup>21</sup> Prokopis Kafarakis and Spyros Mexas used the word *synchordhia* (i.e. chord) to state that singing together is like resonating together within the chord itself. These statements do not differ from those found in other performance contexts investigated in my study, and from one island to another, I could find in some private contexts the same strategies to cope with the prohibition to get together to sing in company. Fortunately, the most dangerous waves of COVID-19 were slowly diminishing, and a glimmer of light began to shine on the possibility of being able to come together again, especially in restaurants, taverns and squares.

### 3. Singing With(out) Mask

One thing that caught my attention when I arrived in the Ionian Islands in the summer of 2021 was how, despite the silence and the absence of singing groups in the taverns, the churches were not only populated by choirs performing the liturgical hymns but, moreover, they were fulfilling their musical duties without wearing face masks, which, as the state of emergency related to the pandemic had not yet passed, were still compulsory in many public places.

In order to investigate today's multipart singing practices in Lixouri, Kefalonia, thanks to Gerasimos Galanos,<sup>22</sup> I interviewed a number of people to record table songs during some meetings. Unfortunately, I ran into some considerable logistical problems related to the spread of the coronavirus: many of the interpreters were not available. I tried, in fact, to get in touch with some elderly singers who had contracted the virus; the same is the case for Rossetos Louzis, conductor of the *Chorodhia kie Mandolinata Argostoliu* (i.e. Choir

21. This statement by Anifantis could be related to one of the definitions Turino gives of 'participatory performance', namely «a particular field of activity in which stylized sound and motion are conceptualized most importantly as heightened social interaction», cfr. TURI-NO, *Music as Social Life*, p. 28.

22. Philologist and local contact of mine in Lixouri.

and Ensemble of Mandolins of Argostoli), Vasilis Kalogeras, conductor of the *Chorodhia Livathus* (i.e. Choir of Leivathos), and Agathangelos Georgakatos, conductor of the *Kefaliniaki Chorodhia* (i.e. Kefalonian Choir), all three of whom were prevented from accepting my invitation due to COVID-19.

Fortunately, despite the initial discouragement, I managed to cope with the pandemic difficulties I encountered by trying to take advantage of all possible opportunities to meet people who could have given me pieces of information about their repertoires and singing practices. Indeed, thanks to the organisational efforts of Galanos, something moved.

I carried out the first recording concerning the table songs of Kefalonia on 7 September 2021. Gerasimos Galanos, after several telephone attempts with the people listed above, had managed to arrange a meeting for me in Argostoli, a town opposite Lixouri and the capital of the island, at the *café Soulatso*, with Spyros Pollatos (1937-), a retired stonemason, and other friends of his age. Pollatos immediately came across as a cheerful and kind person, so much so that he took care to put me at ease, trying to say a few words to me in Italian and then, smiling, asking me: «what do you need me to sing?». I replied that I was more interested in the repertoire of Kefalonia, and so he was very happy with such answer, as immediately informed me that he had sung in the choir of the aforementioned «maestro» Agathangelos Georgakatos, who is the ‘number one’ in Kefalonia, according to Pollatos himself (Figure 3).

Pollatos then informed me that he usually sings together with some of his friends, mainly *kandadhes* but also a few *ariettes*, at some cafés and taverns in the centre of Argostoli. After ordering a coffee for the both of us, he started to sing some local songs, even alone, while he was later joined by two of his friends, Dhimitrios Oktoratos (1936-) and Spyros Tsouroupis (1939-), with whom he also recalled the ‘old good times’ before the pandemic. They, too, confessed to me that they had not been able to meet in recent years, to stay and sing in each other’s company, also adding that a couple of their long-time friends had died during the first waves of the virus’ spread.

In many cafés, pubs, and taverns, wearing face masks was still strongly suggested, where not compulsory, and this can be partially seen in the photo displayed.

One might ask why the singers have not opted for a digital or social media transfer of their practices, as has been the case elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> The reason for this choice is partly due to specific cultural factors (in the communities I visited and interviewed, people only sing together if one is really ‘together’), or just to issues of expertise in the use of digital media. Moreover, it should be taken into account the average age of the singers in Kefalonia, but also in Corfu and Zakynthos, which may have been an obstacle to the use of software and various online applications.

As a matter of fact, along with private choral music practices, concert activities of music associations (such as the case of band ensembles) also had to come to a halt during the pandemic in the Ionian Islands. When it was

23. Cfr. footnote no. 4.



Figure 3. From left to right, Dhimitrios Oktoratos, Spyros Tsouroupis and Spyros Pollatos, performing a *kandadha* from Kefalonia

possible to partially resume some meetings, for example, of orchestra or band rehearsals, these took place outdoors (Figure 4).

#### 4. The Importance of Being Together

“Singing in company” as it is still practised in small Mediterranean societies, [...] brings them together at various times, at bars among friends, during small patron saint feasts, or at home among family around a table, with wine, beer or raki, according to place.<sup>24</sup>

According to the experience of one interpreter from Lixouri (Kefalonia), Nikolas Savramis (1939-), whom I met for the first time at his home on 9 September 2021 for a short interview ([Video 3](#)), one of the most important things while singing in company with his friends is the very same fact of being together. As in many other cases I analysed in the Ionian Islands, perhaps because today's times 'are not the times they used to be', perhaps due to the several lockdowns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time, Savramis' gaze showed a

24. LORTAT-JACOB, *Singing in Company*, p. 23.



Figure 4. Empty seats for *en plein air* rehearsal in times of pandemic in Corfu

mixture of disillusion caused by the impossibility of meeting freely in taverns with his friends to sing and spend an evening together.

Gerasimos Galanos, introduced me to Savramis, and asked him if we could organise a dinner at his house the following evening (10 September 2021), to sing something together, specifying that «however, we must organise the dinner here at your place, Nikolas, because outside is *dangerous* as you know...». Having accepted the proposal, Savramis gave me a big smile, and so the interview began.

When I asked, «what vocal part do you usually sing?», he replied:

I sing them all: when I am in my friends' company, my ear notices the 'missing' voice, and so I immediately join in singing with the missing voice, even the *primos*, even though I am not *primos* (i.e. the first tenor).

From the time I was a child, I liked to sing; whenever I happened to hear some old men singing, as I passed a tavern, I liked it too much and so I could do nothing but get closer and, slowly, especially as I grew older, over time, I too would fit in with their singing with my voice.

Things used to be different, life was different. It was made up of work, then fishermen and peasants would gather in the tavern, in the evening, to drink some wine in company, sing together and, then, straight home! In other words, one was happy with that, and satisfied! It wasn't like now, with television and all the rest... that [i.e. singing together in the tavern] was our fun, because back then [life] was just work and home.

In giving this description, Savramis associates the sadness of the present

moment (namely of not being able to meet in the tavern to sing with friends due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns) with an even stronger feeling that rather concerns a nostalgic perception of singing together in the past, almost as if it were a very long time ago. Savramis states with some nostalgia how fundamental it was precisely that way of sharing one's life with others: after all, it was simple, it was a matter of sharing the worries and labours of work, in the evenings, over a glass of wine and surrounded by the sounds of the voices of the company. To this nostalgic feeling, he adds the names of those who are no longer there, some of them also died because of COVID-19.

It is highly interesting how Savramis superimposes pandemic time with an indefinite mediatised present, discussing, for instance, how television has over time replaced choral singing as the main form and source of entertainment. This may be seen as a nostalgic resistance to the 'modern' times, combined with the strong symbolic connotation of specific places and occasions (the tavern, the *parea*, the night), which may justify to a certain extent the absence of mediatised practices in pandemic time. However, Savramis also says in the interview that many of his friends are dead, some do not feel like going out of the house (especially at that time of the pandemic). In a nutshell, the performance scenarios in some cases have changed and today are also affected by the advancing age of the main performers who have not, in all cases (and Lixouri is just one example), enjoyed a handover to the younger generation or a transfer to a 'presentational performance' dimension.<sup>25</sup>

To my last question, «what does singing together with your friends mean to you?», he answered without thinking too much about it: «this *thing* (in Greek, *prama*) is our very life, the most beautiful and joyful thing of all...» and I think this tells us a lot about the values that interact in their singing together.

As anticipated, a gathering was held at Savramis's home the evening after, given the continuing restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic that would have made it impossible to organise such a dinner or event in an open-air venue. Twenty songs were performed that evening, including *ariettes*, *kandadhes* and satirical songs from Lixouri or Argostoli. Nikolas Savramis invited several of his friends; many others who were originally part of his group have unfortunately passed away, also due to the coronavirus.

Here I want also to take the opportunity to remember two singers I was able to meet and interview in the course of my research in the Ionian Islands, two friends who unfortunately died from the coronavirus. I am referring to Pavlos Marinos (1937-2022) (Figure 5), who passed away at the age of 85 on 18 April 2022; I had the pleasure of meeting him twice in the summer of 2021 and was thus able to collect his testimony as the last *arekiadhoro*s (i.e. interpreter of *arekies*) of his generation in Zakynthos. Moreover, I am speaking of Dionysis Giakoumelos (1943-2023) (Figure 6), who welcomed me into his home in Zakynthos to record some rural songs; his friends say of him that he was one who «knew many country songs», when he was younger he also played the guitar, and since in his later years he had problems with his eyesight, he only

25. TURINO, *Music as Social Life*.

sang in company.

These interpreters – among other aspects – have told me of the importance that the night, with its placid atmosphere, assumed particularly in the period after the Second World War for the group of friends (in Greek, *parea*), who would gather in town taverns to have a drink together and sing in company, at the end of a long and tiring day's work. The legacy of these, and many other singers who died during the COVID-19 pandemic is the confidence that even though some contexts have naturally changed over time, the desire to be together and sing in company has endured.

## 5. Post-Pandemic Times: A Glimpse into the Future

These and other testimonies collected in the course of my fieldwork allowed me to draw the outline of all the practices of vocal music, and particularly of multipart singing, performed in Corfu, Kefalonia and Zakynthos. The continuous confrontation with the performers of the musical repertoires investigated continued also in the period following the conclusion of my stay in the Ionian Islands, through the application of the principles of digital ethnography,<sup>26</sup> by every possible means of communication (e-mail, telephone calls, video calls, but also with the help of social networks: Facebook, Instagram, Viber, etc.). The use of a 'hybrid' ethnography (partly in the field, partly remotely) has made me able to review, re-interpret, correct, deepen and 'return' – albeit virtually – on certain theoretical or analytical issues, by directly questioning my interlocutors, as I wanted to learn (and understand) more and more 'closely' «the meaning they give to their own singing in their own community».<sup>27</sup> This was possible thanks to an approach according to which my analysis of the gathered material focused more on the way people make and conceive their music, in their practices, rather than in the songs of the different genres of the Ionian repertoire as such.

The people I have encountered in these islands have indeed never stopped helping me – even remotely – in the analysis concerning some issues of their musical practices. The aim of my work was to provide the first systematic analysis of the singing and chanting practices of the Ionian islands of Corfu, Kefalonia and Zakynthos. The field research provided a scenario within which at least two macro-categories related to the primary performance contexts of these practices could be identified: singing at table and chanting in church.

What can still be noted is that the various singers – with whom I have remained in contact – continue their musical practices today (i.e. in 2024) and make extensive use of multimedia or social platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook or Instagram, to share the songs and music they perform with their groups of friends and music colleagues. Indeed, on their social media pages, since the lockdown restrictions began to fade, and only after that, singers

26. PINK *et. al*, *Digital Ethnography*.

27. MACCHIARELLA, *Cantare a cuncordu*.



Figure 5. Pavlos Marinos from Zakynthos



Figure 6. Dionysis Giakoumelos from Zakynthos

and musicians have resumed meeting ‘officially’ and ‘legally’ (i.e., not in their homes and in private settings when even this was forbidden) to get together and thus be able to document their performance activities with their own smartphones to share with their friends on social and digital platforms. All this is truly fascinating, as it leads us to consider an aesthetic of persistence that has enabled these performers and their musical practices to survive the disaster caused by the pandemic period, as well as to consolidate certain strategies of self-representation that are now indispensable in their music-making. What I mean here is that, in the absence of being able to ‘officially’ meet each other, on their social media during the pandemic they shared videos and media content of their pre-pandemic performances. From this point of view, the pandemic stimulated only in some performers a more intensive use of social media and platforms to make room for new forms of self-representation. However, again, not to the extent that during the pandemic they were able to meet online to try to keep up their musical practices, but rather to ‘remember’ the pre-pandemic days, using multimedia content already available on some platforms (e.g. on YouTube or Facebook posts). One such case, among many, is the Facebook page of Panajotis Marinou, a singer from Zakynthos.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the differences that stylistically characterise each of the three islands, it emerged that in all the performance scenarios investigated the action of singing ‘together’, whether it is done sitting at the table or standing at the *analojio*<sup>29</sup> in a church, is related to the achievement of the aforementioned *kurdhisma*, which, as I discovered through various interviews conducted in the field and partly remotely, denotes a «way of being together»<sup>30</sup> common to all three islands.

Lastly, in order to answer a few questions, such as, ‘what about the aesthetics of this music?’ ‘What words do singers use to describe their musical practices and values?’, here I have highlighted a few concepts, such as ‘intonation’ (i.e. *kurdhisma*), ‘concord’ and ‘being able to come back to being and singing together’. There will certainly be other opportunities to examine and disseminate further values that may emerge from these musical practices.

As in the course of the meeting of the ICTMD Study Group on Multipart Singing in Cremona (September, 2023), Ignazio Macchiarella pointed out that «sound is a pretext for human interaction», and, in the very same days, Ardian Ahmedaja said that «shaping sounds involves an interaction of values», I therefore believe it is definitely worth emphasising that the way the Ionian singers perceive their ‘concord’ – namely their *kurdhisma* – while singing together, is not just a matter of ‘singing’, as one might understand it. It is rather about sharing values, ideas, concepts and behaviours, together and ‘in company’; with no pandemic lockdowns or social distancing, never more.

28. Web source: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100045742239799>. A further study on the phenomenon of employment of social media and platforms developed by traditional interpreters during the pandemic can be found in CARUSO, *Digital humanity*.

29. Term from the Greek-Byzantine ecclesiastical glossary indicating both the lectern for readings and singing and the performance space within which the singing itself is performed.

30. LORTAT-JACOB, *Ditelo con i fiori*, p. 55.



## AUDIOVISUAL MATERIALS

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