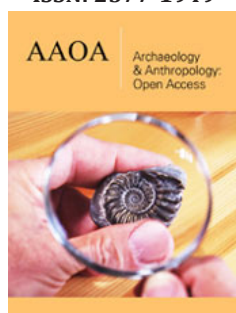


Incarnations of Laiko and Popular Music in Queer Contexts of Greece

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Abstract

The concept of the popular in Greek indigenous contexts and mediaesthetics resonates with the notion of 'laiko'. The notion of laiko conveys a combination of working class and provincial elements and intersects urban and rural boundaries. Very often this notion takes the form of a music idiom describing the laiko subject deriving from the genre of 'laiki' music often performed with a stringed music instrument called bouzouki while its cultural meanings and aesthetics stem from a Turkish colonized past and the orient (e.g. rebetiko). Contemporary laiki music is usually performed in laika night venues such as ellinadika night clubs and pistes (or bouzoukia). What is more, in these environments traditional masculinities and femininities are privileged and performed while sexist, homophobic and heteronormative narratives circulate and reproduce heteropatriarchal, phallogocentric and ethnocentric norms. This article analyses the incarnations of laiko and pop music in Greece by queer performers belonging in the Greek LGBTQ+ communities and the drag and ballroom underground scenes who use them in frameworks of alternative music and club entertainment to deconstruct and subvert existing patriarchic and conservative national and religious narratives as well as gender conforming binaries. These queer groups are influenced by female and queer Greek, British and American pop music icons and amalgamate laiko, rap, pop, EDM and EBM qualities to produce drag outcomes and performances. Thus, the article designates the emergent possibilities of an alternative modality of the Greek "popular" and its power for queering and agonistic carnivalesque.

Keywords: Homophobic; Music icons; Pop; Music

Introduction

This article refers to queer music production and its relationship with the permutations of popular music in Greece, mainly encapsulated into the indigenous category of 'laiko'. I argue that nowadays queer music production and performance reveals at the utmost the intersecting paths and aspects of different genres of popular music. Following this lead, I will refer to the intersections of the indigenous form of popular music in Greece, that is "laiki music", with rap, commercial pop music, electronic dance music and electronic body music. Through these intersections I will show how transgender, non-gender conforming and in general queer subjects in Greece appropriate, reinterpret and queer laiko and the aforementioned forms in order to criticize nationalist, Christian-Orthodox, phallogocentric, homophobic and sexist hegemonic discourses, highlight and simultaneously reject the class, racial, ethnic and gender discriminations emanating from the long-term heteronormative use of laiko and rap on the basis of heteropatriarchy and Greekness and lastly to decolonize these genres from their traditional global and domestic appropriation as male domains where femininity is always subjugated.

Queer possibilities in popular music are not unprecedented in the Greek case, nor are they a new phenomenon in today's era. As Jodie [1] points out music since the 20th century has been an arena for marginalized voices and sexualities to express themselves and identities to be reshaped. Popular music including rap has always been queer. From Jazz and Mick Jagger, old and new rappers such as Queen Latifa, Missy Eliot, the queer rap collective Deep Dickollective, Princess Nokia and Nicki Minaj to queer laiko singers such as Giorgos Mazonakis, Lepa and Yiannis Floriniotis, queer music universes and queer music morphologies were

there to trouble and puzzle the masses, to cause moral panic, but paradoxically also to create unutterable acceptance. Undoubtedly, popular music is a controversial space where multiple and often contradictory meanings circulate. Therefore, the study of queer popular and alternative music reveals “transformative agency” [2] but additionally, I would argue, reveals the degree of tolerance of a society towards this anti-heteronormative intentionality.

If we agree with [3] that music works as a prophecy, like a “harbinger of change” [1] queer musical genres speak of new realities that lie within previous ones, anticipating new futurities if we stand with the philosophical positions of [4]. As [1] stresses music empowers queer communities and is a queer survival tactic and according to Warner (Warner cited in Jagose, 2000:38) a queer construction of the world based on an agonistic performance in which what we “become” depends on the beliefs and interactions with others, especially in aggressive heteronormative environments. Accordingly, these queer music figurations in Greece interact through mediated ways with multiple audiences and texts and create different affectivities of competition, hatred, enjoyment and jolt. The methodological tools used for the gathering of data and particularly for the scope of this article are based on anthropological fieldwork and media research and mainly on the observation of the music videos and live performances of the queer music artists.

Laiko and Pop Music in Greece

The concept of the popular in Greek indigenous contexts and mediaesthetics echoes an indigenous meaning of the popular which resonates with the notion of ‘laiko’. Very often this indigenous signification regarding the subject takes the form of an embodied music-emotional idiom derived from the genre of laiki music – which we find in light and heavy categorizations depending on musical context and rhythm – and refers to the music which uses a stringed instrument called bouzouki and connects with an orientalist past and the developments of Rebetiko subculture and bouzoukia culture in Greece Kallimopoulou E. & P. Poulos. 2017. Laiko, Popular Music of the world: VIII-XIV, Genres (XI): Genres: Europe, Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Popular Music in the World, 448-454. Specifically, Greek commercial pop music mostly refers to the hybridization of laiko with American pop music styles and club dance music. In these terms, paradigmatically we could refer to this local hybrid genre as laiko-pop. These notions of laiko and laiko-pop convey a combination of working class and provincial elements and at the same time traverse strict class, urban and rural boundaries. Contemporary laiki and Greek pop music are usually performed in laika night venues such as ellinadika and pistes (or bouzoukia) [8-11] with live music, or DJ sets.

On the other hand, hip-hop in Greece, with its most pivotal element which is none other than rap, is becoming more and more popular in post-crisis and post-pandemic Greece and has been embraced mainly by straight young people (mainly male), and very recently by queer youth. Greek hip-hop music is often compared to rebetiko and laiko both by Greek rappers (e.g. Taki Tsan, Xplicit) and by the diverse hip-hop audience, while commercial rap (e.g. trap) is performed in laiko entertainment venues such as ellinadika

and pistes (e.g. Enastron club Giorgos Sampanis and SNIK, ellinadika in Peristeri). Traditional masculinities and femininities are privileged and promoted in laiko and trap milieus, while sexist, homophobic and heteronormative musical narratives circulate and reproduce heteropatriarchal norms [8-10]. Heteropatriarchal norms are also often combined with nationalist, Christian Orthodox and even neofascist expressions and attachments in such popular entertainment settings [12]. What is highly interesting though is that during the last five years in Greece there have been intense and systematic fusions and collaborations between Greek pop-laiko and queer artists in TV music shows and competitions (see Foureira and Chraja Mad Music Awards 2020, Helena Paparizou and Holly Grace Mad Music Awards 2023). Notably, queer music icons during the 1980s and 1990s like Giorgos Mazonakis and Yiannis Floriniotis had also played a crucial queering role in the laiko and laiko-pop music scene and imagery while during the past few years homosexual rappers like Vdeligma had also contributed to a significant queering of the hip-hop scene from a masculine however standpoint.

Giorgos Mazonakis is an ambivalent figure of the laiko-pop scene because while there were widespread rumors for his homosexuality, and he had also been followed by a gay audience he was never self-identified as homosexual or queer. Yiannis Floriniotis, although more open than Mazonakis for his fluidity of gender, he was rather a grotesque figure of laiko and a father of a traditional Greek family. He was an eccentric “singer-showman” who belonged in the subcultural laiko realm of Skyládiko which was a heterotopic nighttime space for the expression of both hetero and homoerotic differences [13]. However all these queer performativities were more subcutaneous and non-confrontational against the robust heteronormative and heterosexual laiko stratification. Thus, this article discusses the incarnations and reappropriations of laiko, rap, pop and club dance music in Greece by queer performers who belong to the Greek feminist and LGBTQ+ scene. These artists use them in clearly political terms and contexts of alternative expression, artistic work, performance and entertainment to subvert hegemonic heteropatriarchal and nationalist narratives, as well as binary appropriations and views of gender. The internet is the first channeling pillar of these queer performances, while live performances in queer hangouts, queer nightclubs and cabarets, alternative art events, marches, sit-ins, rap anti-racist, feminist and queer festivals (e.g. Pride), are their physical spaces. After the murder of the queer activist and drag artist Zak Kostopoulos (or Zackie oh) in broad daylight in a pedestrian street of Athens, these productions increased greatly while the murder became a symbol of resistance, remembrance and poetic performance.

Queernesses of Laiko Music

I will first start with drag appropriations of laiko by referring to the drag artist Kangela Tromokratisch and her piece “Ai mori”. The music video begins with a homophobic televised outburst by Bogdanos (a right wing journalist/politician), while two drag performers (one is Kangela) watch the show dressed and painted eccentrically like a laikia family (mother/daughter) mocking the entrenched traditional Greek family. The clarinet mixes with house

beats, and angry queers dance to the sounds with colorful and heavy make ups. The lyrics of the song that mimic a local gay/trans dialect (kalliarda) attack the sexists, the fat phobics, the hypochondriacs and the sickophobes and emphatically the nationalists. Indicatively the lyrics say: "Oh baby, you want Macedonia to be only Greek, old-fascist stupid come on baby, the queers are here to stay, the queers have taken up the space, with heels and cowries we will erase you, come Kangela, We are all Kangela". Notwithstandingly, "kangela" in Greek slang denotes the person who is being in a state of madness. Kangela mainly participates in alternative events in alternative spaces (e.g. Fine Arts Concert, queer cabarets and collectives). She is influenced by the British pop and drag scene artist Leigh Bowery [14], studied in England and is considered quite underground in the framework of the Greek drag artistry [15].

Another emblematic queer artist who uses and queers laiko configurations and connotations is Chraja. Chraja is one of the most iconic drag performers and participants in the ballroom scene of Greece (father of House of Kareola). Chraja queers laiko forms through her music and she also reclaims it like Kangela for queer purposes. In her song "I am not an alien" (which came up as a response to journalists calling her trans alien) she uses the aforementioned underground laiko subgenre [14] which is called skyládiko [16] performed in Skiladika clubs [11]. In the lyrics of the song, Chraja compares laiko night clubs (ellinadiko Artana) with queer clubs (Artana versus Be-queer) and she talks about her erotic game with someone who is ignoring her. She also blends the lyrics with the well-known Sting's track "Englishman in New York". Chraja usually appropriates music aesthetics from foreign and Greek pop music artists such as Beyonce, Elena Papparizou and Foureira. She frequents the queer bar Be-queer doing also lyp synch, drag performance and vogue femme. Her iconic track "Kicks in 12-inch hills" became a marching anthem for the protest marches for the murder of the drag queen Zackie Oh. She has been criticized by Greek priests for insulting the holyspirit and the Orthodox Church, but also for her provocative appearance. For example, in the visual content of her music video "Kicks in 12-inch hills" she queers orthodox saints, by putting herself in their place. Her futuristic look seems to be inspired by sci-fi and alien movies and she constantly changes styles and wigs. Her music includes a lot of electronic elements (synthesizers, electronic beats) and is always of high quality.

Queernesses of Rap, Electronic Dance and Pop Music

Ingrid Hideki who identifies as a "fox hybrid queen" from Crete who lives in Berlin uses a repertoire of pop, house, rap, synth-pop, electronic dance and body music elements, but not laiko. According to her public interviews she chose to produce music because she was inspired by pop divas like Spice Girls [17] and others, and she has collaborated with drag and queer rap artists such as Marianah Grindr and Dolly Vara. Her inspiration to stay in this scene was the power to influence international pop culture [17]. In her song Reclaim which she performs with the queer rapper Dolly Vara she reclaims the word slut, as a resistant way to the marginalization and demonization of transgender groups, especially by religious

groups. Hideki uses a mysterious goth and satanic aesthetic to mock this representation and attack the Christian religion responsible for the oppression of the LGBTQ+ community in the US and thus disperses globally her performance.

Paradigmatically in the introduction of her music video she writes that Christian Church has stigmatized transgender populations through their comparison to the diabolic. She urges queer and non-gender conforming populations to explore their pansexualities and she joins hands with Dolly Vara to perform an irritating spitting of rhymes. In her track XXX coperformed with Marianah Grindr she sings in Greek over synth pop beats and rap intervals. The two drag artists elaborate the toxicity, the restraints and the possibilities of sexual freedom both inside the queer community and heteronormative Greek society. They are dressed in tights and run around the streets like sex workers standing in awkward poses. They address issues of homophobia in hypocrite heteronormative Greek society, and they support Chraja's statements in one of her tracks that "men have to be killed".

Concluding Thoughts

It is therefore interesting to see how these queer musical cultures are articulated in the present, in relation to earlier appropriations of laiko and pop music in queer contexts that occurred marginally, between trash and official laiko culture. And how they embody a politically-conscious, ironic, chaotic and rhizomatic performativity vis-à-vis heteropatriarchal forms of popular culture. How these performativities coalesce with socio-temporal and spatio-temporal conditions and circumstances framing the contemporary landscape of queerness and political queer subjectivities in Greece. As mentioned before, during the 1980s and the 1990s we are confronted with different types of queer music personas, less confrontational than the present ones, which were either trying to be assimilated through their explicit and phenomenal homosexuality in a heteronormative and sexist Greek world, or they were playing hide and seek with their queerness because of fear of rejection. It is also of great importance to observe how these individualities and collectivities will evolve in the future but also how they will continue to aesthetically and musically imagine a future [4].

To what extent will they manage to oppose and not succumb to alt-right practices of superficial respect for homosexuality but also endure obvious homophobic attacks and what lyrical narratives will they articulate and employ while liberal feminism, pinkwashing, homonormativity and homonationalism develop very rapidly in the contemporary era [18] has told us, is not a priori groundbreaking. Therefore, it takes constant rupture and struggle amongst these drag and queering practices and processes of reinstituting the popular otherwise in order to avoid assimilation, particularly in growing and aggressive neoliberal contexts that are often fast-moving, flexible and hypocritical. It is a fact that the larger development of these digitalized performativities and performances occurred during crisis chronotopes and in an atmosphere where the progressive left in Greece seemed to shape and cultivate a more positive stance toward the LGBTQ+ and feminist communities both institutionally

and socially while the right and far right seemed to lose ground. What will happen from now on in an increasingly neoconservative and assertive era, at least in Greek socio-cultural contexts, that uses a dangerous combination of overt and underhanded tactics against LGBTQ+ communities? Will these musical artistic practices continue and survive? And if that is possible, in which forms? Will they be more widely reactionary and inclusive or will they become more bounded keeping their visualities for specific audiences? And to expand my questions further: How these figurations coalesce with other international queer popular artistry who may embody more destigmatized identities and less confrontational queer performativities as well as lyrical contents reverberating with an “approved” homosexuality? What all these say about our local societies and the state of queer popular music production in a global scale?

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