



# ARMONICAS

by Hugo Strötbaum

## ODD & EXTINCT (4) : ARMONICAS

There are countless pictures of rebetika musicians playing bouzouki. Pictures of musicians playing a key accordion also abound, but very few pictures exist of rebetika musicians playing the key accordion's predecessor, the *button accordion* or *armonica*<sup>1</sup>. In the course of time the *armonica* was gradually replaced by the accordion with piano keys on the righthand side. The *button accordion* or *armonica* used to be a very popular instrument at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in many parts of the world. Armonica music was a regular feature of the Greek music scene in pre-World War I Constantinople (Istanbul).

The earliest armonica recordings all stem from Constantinople. Judging from the large number of armonica recordings that were made between 1903 and 1910 by the major commercial record companies, we may conclude that armonica music formed an important part of the pre-World War I Greek music scene in Istanbul. The most popular musicians were **Ioánnis Ayazmatzís**, **Yángos** (= Y(o)ánnis or Vasilís?) **Psamathianós** (aka Psomathianós, Psamátyali or Pandelonás) and the ensembles of **Pétros Zounarákis** (or Zounarás) and **Mítsos** (= Dimítris; surname unknown)<sup>2</sup>. In 1909 a Greek instrumental quartet made recordings in Cairo, Egypt. The names of the four musicians are unknown. Nor is it known if this was a local Greek-Egyptian ensemble, or a group from Constantinople or Athens visiting Egypt.

In the late 1920s Athens established itself as a new musical center and witnessed the rise of artists like of **Andóni(o)s Amirális** (or “**Papatzís**”, as he was commonly called), and **Stéfo** (surname unknown). Apart from making a number of solo recordings, the latter also accompanied singer **Kiría Pipína**. And we should not forget to mention **Michális Trímis**<sup>3</sup>, the famous ensemble of **Yánnis Kalaycioglou** with **Vasílis Psamathianós** and the not so wellknown armonica-player, **Ioánnis Fókios** (or Chiótiis)<sup>4</sup>. Another armonica-player was the Greek-American **S. Parísis** (first name unknown<sup>5</sup>), who accompanied singer/guitar-player Gust Doussas in the 1930s (USA).

**Andóni(o)s Amirális** aka “**Papatzis**” was unquestionably the greatest of them all. A mindblowing virtuoso with a unique shrill mercurial playing style, who really knew how to make your blood boil. A fantastic soloist but also a tasteful accompanist playing delicate inventive fill-ins while accompanying singers like Dalgas and Roza!<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as φύσα, φουσαρμόνικα, μισοφωνία or μεσοφωνία.

<sup>2</sup> I do not know if Pétros Zounarákis and Mítsos were themselves armonica-players or just the leaders of the ensembles.

<sup>3</sup> “Μιχάλης Τρίμης, ‘Αρχοντας της αρμόνικας’ by Ηλίας Βολιότης-Καπετανάκης (in ΜΕΤΡΟΝΟΜΟΣ of January-March 2010, No. 36).

<sup>4</sup> At the end someone shouts “Γειά σου, Γιάνγκο μου, Χιώτη μου, λεβεντιά μου”. Ioánnis Fókios was a music dealer on the island of Chios (see page 31 of *Report on Visit to Greece April-May 1930* by Edmund Michael Innes, reproduced on website [www.recordingpioneers.com](http://www.recordingpioneers.com).)

<sup>5</sup> I did some internet research on the identity of this S. Parísis and found the following options for his first name: Spiros (1891-1946), Simeon, Stavros or Sotirios (....-1993). Case not closed!

<sup>6</sup> Listen to Papatzis' lyrical, sensitive, subtle, elegant, controlled armonika accompaniment to Dalgas' singing on the Σουλτανί Μανές Όποιος βρεθεί στον πόνο μου (on 4CD TO PALIO GRAMMOFONO, CD 1, #14). While Dalgas is singing, Papatzis holds back, but whenever the singing stops, he erupts in a series of quavering whistling

I guess very few Greek accordion-players still know how to play *button accordion* or *armonica*. Good musicians like **Andréas Tsekóúras** and **Lázaros Koulaxízis** may still be able to play it (Lázaros' father played one).

In 2011, while in Athens, I visited **Iraklís Vavátsikas**, an accomplished squeeze-box player and great admirer of Papatzís' music. Iraklís made me aware of the difference between a *button accordion (armonica)* and the *(piano)key accordion*<sup>7</sup>. For want of a button accordion, Iraklís grabbed his *bandoneon* (also a kind of button accordion!) and demonstrated that Papatzís could not possibly have produced his dazzling whirling flourishes on a key accordion. Although not a musicologist, I found Vavátsikas' demonstration pretty convincing.

This year (in 2014) Nikos Dionysopoulos and I visited **Andréas Tsekóúras** and **Lázaros Koulaxízis**. Tsekouras has an interesting small collection of button accordions.

The Greek academic world is also beginning to show an interest in this sadly overlooked instrument, which has vanished completely. **Grigoria-Maria Androulaki** wrote a thesis about the armonica, entitled "*Η ΑΡΜΟΝΙΚΑ, ένα άγνωστο όργανο του ρεμπέτικου*" (2011).

Some years ago a CD with accordion music from all over the globe also containing Papatzis recordings was issued: *SQUEEZE BOX "Squeeze Play – A World Accordion Anthology"*. This CD was later re-issued as *GLOBAL ACCORDION – Early recordings* on WERGO SM 1623 2 (2001)

In his book *Düñkü İstanbul'da Hovardalık ("Fuḫṣ-i Atik")* Turkish author Ahmet Rasim (1864-1932) described life in Istanbul in the early twentieth century. In the stories "*Bir Kâğıthane Gezmesi*" and "*Beyoğlu'nda Bir Karnaval Geces*" - which are all about musical entertainment in the Istanbul of those days - are two references to an *armonik*, in other words an *armonica*. The first edition dates from 1922.

There is also another type of *armonica* (or *fisarmonica*) which - much like a *sandouri* - is played in a horizontal position. This instrument has a bellows, which is operated with one hand, while the other hand plays the melody on the keyboard. In broader musical circles this instrument is better known as a *harmonium*. Several pictures of such an instrument can be found in the booklet which accompanies the wonderful doubleCD: *Sámos stis 78 strofés. Istorikés Ichografísis 1918-1958*, produced by Nikos Dionysópoulos. These same pictures are reproduced in the accompanying armonica **slide show** (4).

A picture of a similar instrument can be seen on page 18 of *The Fred Gaisberg Diaries Part 2: Going East (1902-1903)* on this website. It is a photograph of the famous female singer Gauhardjan being accompanied by a harmonium-player. In his book *Musical Instruments* (New Delhi, 1979) B. C. Deva writes:

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fairground notes. At the end both artists acknowledge each other's artistry by shouting "Γεια σου Νταλγκα! ..... Γεια σου Παπατζή μου!".

<sup>7</sup> The few existing photographs of Andónis Papatzís in action show him holding or playing a **key accordion**.

“The most ubiquitous invader [from the West] is the **harmonium**. Since it is easily carried about, requires no tuning and is not very expensive, it has been used extensively in [Indian] folk music, ‘light music’ and Hindustani classical music; though Karnatak classical music has so far kept it out of bounds. But the fact remains that its very structure makes it incapable of producing accurate pitches (*srutis*) and ornaments (*gamakas*) which are some of the most beautiful ingredients of our music”.

Last but not least: a *fisarmonika* may also indicate a *mouthingorgan* (or *harmonica* or *mouthingharp*). In my record collection is a recording by a certain **Fotis Haloulakos**: «**Η Φυσαρμόνικα**» (Co 38781 / 7238-F / red label COLUMBIA USA)

Στράτος [Παγουμτζής] & Στελλάκης [Περπινιάδης] (**φυσαρμόνικα: Φώτης Χαλουλάκος** / Ορχήστρα Δ)σις [Δημήτριος Σέμσης] Σαλονικιός).

Originally recorded in Athens, between 3 Jan-27 July 1947 (matrix. no. CG 2228 / coupling no. DG 6639. The instrument being played is clearly a *mouthingorgan* or *mouthingharp* and not the instrument we discussed before.

For info on **Φώτης Χαλουλάκος η Φωτάκης**: see *Ρεμπέτικη Ανθολογία IV* (by Τάσος Σχορέλης), pp 123-124, 141-158.

*I welcome your comments!*