Agapios Tomboulis: an attempt at resuscitation

by Hugo Strötbaum

How to get a Dutchman on the trail of hidden treasures in Athens is perhaps a bizarre story...

It must have been in the eighties, at a Greek concert in Utrecht, that I first met Stavriana Livadarou and her husband Harry Gen. Stavriana, who knew that I was involved with Greek music, and rebetika in particular, had once told me that her family had been close to the family and friends of Agapios Tomboulis, and that there might be an interesting story here.

For the uninitiated: Agapios Tomboulis was a famous oud player of Armenian birth, born in Constantinople. At a certain point he moved to Greece, where he subsequently lived for many years, playing an important role in the musical life of the country. With his oud (oriental lute), he mainly accompanied singers. The name Tomboulis suited him well, because “tombul” means “chubby, fat” in Turkish, and Agapios was indeed a chubby guy. Given his surname, this may perhaps have been a family trait.

Occasionally Stavriana reminded me that I really needed to talk to her mother, because she could tell me all kind of things about Tomboulis; but, one way or another, the ‘Tomboulis project’ did not get off the ground at this time. Maybe it was because Tomboulis was not a musician who occupied the limelight. He was known as an accompanist to singers, of which Roza Eskenazi - also from Istanbul - was the most famous.

Tomboulis was the man who always took care of a solid melodic - rhythmic base. Besides the oud, Tomboulis also played a number of other instruments. In many old photographs in the book Rebetika Tragoudia of Ilias Petropoulos we see him with a cümbüş, a toumbeleki, and two as yet unidentified stringed instruments with a round wooden body.

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1."Agapios’ is the Greek version of the Armenian name ‘Hagop’.
2.Ilias Petropoulos’ book Rebetika Tragoudia is published by Kedros (Athens, 1983) and is full of lyrics and authentic photographs from around the rebétika period.
3.A stringed instrument of Turkish (Istanbul) origin, consisting of a round metal pan with a skin stretched over the opening, and a fretless long neck. In fact, a kind of large banjo, with a similar sound (see fig. 1).
A good start is half the work...

When we had once more conceived a plan to go on holiday to Greece in the autumn, it seemed like a good opportunity to finally tackle the Tomboulis project seriously. I called Stavriana and explained my plans. She immediately pledged her full cooperation. Meanwhile, however, her mother had unfortunately deceased, so that an important source of first-hand information about Tomboulis was now lost. But something had already awakened in me, because of the following. During one of our last meetings Harry Gen had shown us some beautiful colour photographs, which he had taken in Athens during a visit to Tomboulis’ granddaughter. I could hardly believe my eyes. There were pictures of Tomboulis’ oud (lute), of his toumbeleki (metal vase drum), his zília (finger cymbals) and even of the tuning pipe he used to tune his instruments. So, a number of original Tomboulis instruments still existed!
Fig. 2 His finger cymbals, pitch pipe and stamp (from New York)  
(courtesy Harry Gen)

This very same oud can also be seen in a number of old pictures.
Fig. 3 One of Tomboulis’ ouds
(courtesy Harry Gen)

Fig. 4 Technical drawing of oud in Fig. 3 by Χρήστος Πράσσας
There was also a photo of a curious kind of flat round twelve-string *oud*. At the end of the neck, on the headstock, was a metal plate bearing the words ΕΦΕΥΡΕΣΙΣ ΤΟΜΠΟΥΛ[Η] (Invention of Tomboulis). Would that instrument have been built by

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* There is a famous photograph of Tomboulis with Roza Eskenazi and Dimitris Semsis (nicknamed 'Salonikios'). In that picture he has another strange twelve-stringed instrument in his hands, which looks more like a wooden version of a Turkish *çümbüs*. Recently, I found out that there is in fact a similar metal plate on that instrument. The words on this plate had not been discernible on hitherto published versions of that picture, but in the recently released DVD about Roza Eskenazi, “My Sweet Canary”, there is a very good reproduction of this photo in which the words ‘ΕΦΕΥΡΗΣΙΣ ΤΟΜΠΟΥΛ[Η]’ can clearly be seen. At one time the ‘Η’ must have broken off (see DVD: Time: 46.47 – 46.53, Title: 2/8, Chapter: 12/18)
Tomboulis himself, or was it made by a professional instrument maker on his instructions?

Fig. 6 One of Tomboulis’ oudolas
(courtesy Harry Gen)

The round body of the oudola is 39cm in diameter, the neck is 49cm long. Total length ca. 88cm. The body is 3,5cm deep.

Fig. 7 The head stock of the oudola with metal plaque
(courtesy Harry Gen)
Consulting the sparse literature about Tomboulis, I found that sadly little was known about him. To begin with, there were obvious differences of opinion on when he was born. I found four different birth years: 1884, 1887, 1891 and 1893. There was also disagreement on the date of his death. That he was born in Constantinople (Istanbul) was fortunately undisputed.

I asked Stavriana if she would contact Aleka – the granddaughter of Agapios Tomboulis, and Stavriana's childhood friend - and tell her of my plans to put her grandfather's life on the map. Then I wrote a long letter to the granddaughter and explained what information and material I was looking for. I added my first provisional Tomboulis file, accompanied by quite a few questions. Aleka wrote back, saying that we were welcome.

Meanwhile I heard from Stavriana - and later in Athens also from granddaughter Aleka - how it was that both families had such close ties. It turned out that Stavriana’s parents had lived in the Vyrona Tomboulis family home for a few years, from late 1943 to 1947. Stavriana’s father and Aleka’s father knew each other because they worked for the same company: the ΔΕΗ, or Δημόσια Επιχείρηση Ηλεκτρισμού ΑΕ, the Greek electricity company. Towards the end of 1943 Stavriana’s family became homeless through the bombing of Athens by the British, and Tomboulis family decided to take in the Livadaros family into their home, as Dimitra - Stavriana’s mother - was pregnant. They loaded their remaining household goods onto a cart and walked all the way from the Gizi neighbourhood to the Tomboulis family home in Vyrona. And so, a few months later, Stavriana’s mother gave birth to her first child, a boy. Tomboulis’ daughter Chrysavyi (= Avghoula) became its νονά (godmother). After the war, Stavriana’s family moved back to Gizi, but both families remained in close contact.

On to Vyrona, Athens!

In October 2011 the cold-case team left for Greece. I arrived in Athens, called Tomboulis’ granddaughter, and made an appointment for the next day at her home in the Vyrona district - the same house where her grandfather Agapios and his family had lived. Aleka and her husband Christos received us warmly. After our first meeting a pile of old photos soon appeared on the table. There were photos of Tomboulis in various poses and situations and from different periods; alone, with his wife, with his wife and children, with Roza Eskenazi, and with other musicians. When we had seen all the photos, Tomboulis’ instruments were brought out: the oud, a toumbeleki, and also that weird round string instrument of which Harry Gen had taken a photo (see fig. 6).

In between, I made notes of what Aleka and Christos told us. On these occasions my wife Paula, acts as a sort of second (and often better) memory. At our parting Aleka and Christos invited us for dinner on the following Saturday. This seemed like an excellent
idea, because there were still many questions to be asked. Meanwhile, we were able to process all the information we had received and come up with new questions.

**Light in the darkness…**

The Saturday started all right: Aleka and Christos produced an official document from 1983, an extract from the Athens register of population, containing very detailed information on three Tomboulis generations. I read that Agapios Tomboulis came into the world in 1884 in Istanbul as the son of Ilias and Froso⁵ and that he died in Vyrona, Athens, on September 17, 1967. His first wife was called Froso, and from that marriage two children emerged, Ilias and Frangoulis.

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⁵ Possible error. Other sources report that Tomboulis’ mother was called Peristera.
 Fig. 9 Document (1983)  
(courtesy Aleka Prassa-Tombouli)
Aleka told us that there had been a third son called Yorgos. It turned out that Yorgos was shot and killed by the Germans in a raid during WWII, which explained why his name did not occur in the 1983 document. In 1923 Agapios Tomboulis remarried to Alexandra Tachtsis. His daughter Avyi, or Chrysavyi, was born within this marriage, and Aleka, our hostess, was her daughter in turn. However, there was another surprise waiting for us! Aleka's husband Christos had scanned all the old photos to file on a CD-ROM. The evening could not go wrong.

And so to the oudóla...

Of course, I have not known Tomboulis personally, but from the stories of Stavriana, and granddaughter Aleka, he emerged as a pleasant, good-natured, cheerful personality, with a great sense of humour. Most pictures of Tomboulis show that clearly. Stavriana can still get excited when she talks about the fantastic atmosphere in the Tomboulis home. Recently I discovered, in the book Rebetika Tragoudia, a short excerpt from an interview that Petropoulos had made in 1972 with Alexandra, Tomboulis' wife. Alexandra talks about the instruments her husband played: "My husband, Agapios Tomboulis, played oud, oudóla, banjo (= kümbüş), defi (tambourine) and toumbano (vase drum). And he also played zilía (finger cymbals). And if he was somewhere and he had no instrument with him, then he would grab a tray and begin to beat it. Bam - bam – bam, on he would go. Sometimes he did a village sheep imitation: ... bhee bhee. Then he tied sheep bells to his leg and he sang - oh, how my darling would sing - and he called bhee bhee .... while the bells jingled. He also had a different kind of oud, a round one, that he called an "oudóla". He said how he wanted the instrument made, and others built it for him, just as a seamstress makes a dress. It was his own invention ...:  

When I was reading this over the phone to Stavriana, she responded delightedly and said: "It's like I hear Alexandra's voice!" 

So that strange flat round instrument was called an oudóla! Based on existing photos we can now conclude that Tomboulis owned (at least) three oudólas.

Tomboulis: artist and composer

Agapios Tomboulis is to be heard on countless recordings from the period 1929-1960: on a few as a soloist, but mostly as an accompanist on the oud. There are also recordings where he sings, in Greek and in Turkish. No wonder, since he originally came from Istanbul. Tomboulis also has a number of compositions to his credit including "Μπαμ Και Μπουμ Μη Τρως" (Bam and boom, do not eat) and "Ελα Δημητρούλα Μ'έλα" (Come...  

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6 The original Greek text can be found on page 267 of Rebetika Tragoudia by Ilias Petropoulos.
My Dimitroula Come). The latter song dates from 1951: it was dedicated to Stavriana’s mother, Dimitra, and recorded by Roza. There is still a lot of research needed before the definitive biography of Agapios Tomboulis can be written. This is only the beginning...

Translated from the Dutch by Tony Klein (Sept 16th 2013) and adapted by the author.


I am greatly indebted to Stavriana Gen-Livadarou for reminding me regularly that I should focus my research on Agapios Tomboulis and Harry Gen for sharing with me a number of his pictures of Tomboulis’ instruments.

I am also extremely grateful to Aleka Prassa-Tombouli and Hristos Prassas for their hospitality, support and cooperation during this project.

I was able to see for the first time a number of Tomboulis’ original instruments from up close. They also supplied me with scans of pictures from their unique collection of old photographs.

Without these four people...

Σας ευχαριστώ πάρα πολύ!

This song is not to be confused with the famous composition by Panayotis Toundas, “Dimitroula Mou”, one of Roza Eskenazi’s other successes. Both songs (“Ελα Δημητρούλα Μ’έλα” and “Δημητρούλα Μου”) can be heard on YouTube.
DISCOGRAPHY of recordings of Agapios Tomboulis as solo performer or as composer/lyricist. Not included are the numerous recordings in which Tomboulis acted as accompanying instrumentalist. (UNDER CONSTRUCTION)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>MATRIX NUMBER</th>
<th>FACE NUMBER</th>
<th>COUPLING NUMBER</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>ARTIST(S)</th>
<th>LABEL</th>
<th>REC. DATE (ATHENS)</th>
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<td>WG 532</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>DG 334</td>
<td>Το μαναθάκι</td>
<td>Αγάπης Τομπούλης (συνθέτης/συνθεωρητής)</td>
<td>COLUMBIA</td>
<td>between 03-06-1933 and 31-07-1933</td>
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<td>CG 1208</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>DG 6111</td>
<td>Τσιφτέτσι</td>
<td>Αιγουάλα Τομπούλη &amp; Αγάπης Τομπούλης (vocals?)</td>
<td>COLUMBIA</td>
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<td>CG 1223</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>DG 6111</td>
<td>Το ερωτευμένο Τσούπρα μ’ το μανθάνου σου</td>
<td>Ηλίας Τσίμης &amp; Αιγουάλα Τομπούλη &amp; Ιάνα Χοντά (vocals?) - συν. Ι. Πετροπούλου</td>
<td>COLUMBIA</td>
<td>June-Dec 1934</td>
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<tr>
<td>CG 1385</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>DG 6201 DT 75 (Turkish no.)</td>
<td>Τσούπρα μ’ το μανθάνου σου</td>
<td>Ρόζα Εσκεναίδη, Αγάπης Τομπούλης (ούτι)</td>
<td>COLUMBIA</td>
<td>Jan-June 1936</td>
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| BG 119-1      | 30-1698     | AO 304          | Χρόνος Δερβίσακοσ | Αγάπης Τομπούλης (ούτι) / Λάμπρος Λεωνταρίδης (λύρα πολιτική) | HMV | 27-05-1929 |
| BG 120-1      | 30-1709     | AO 333          | Χρόνος Λάξικοσ | Αγάπης Τομπούλης (ούτι) / Λάμπρος Λεωνταρίδης (λύρα πολιτική) | HMV | 27-05-1929 |
| BG 121-1      | 30-1712     | AO 334          | Χρόνος Ανατολίτικοσ | Αγάπης Τομπούλης (ούτι) / Λάμπρος Λεωνταρίδης (λύρα πολιτική) | HMV | 27-05-1929 |
| BW 3031-1     | 30-2884     | AO 390          | Τσιφτέ-τέλι | Αγάπης Τομπούλης (ούτι) / Λάμπρος Λεωνταρίδης (λύρα πολιτική) | HMV | 03-12-1929 |
| BW 3029-1     | 30-2885     | AO 391          | Γενι Μπαρίζ (Yeni Bahriye) | Αγάπης Τομπούλης (ούτι) / Λάμπρος Λεωνταρίδης (λύρα πολιτική) | HMV | 03-12-1929 |
| OW 103        | 150-654     | AO 1011         | Καρυτ Μουμαίρ Κάντο (Garip Muharir kanto) | Αγάπης Τομπούλης (vocals) (με λύρα, ούτι και κιθάρα) | HMV | 12-05-1931 |
| OW 104        | 150-655     | AO 1011         | Καρυτ Νυί Γκαζέλ (Garip Ninni kanto) | Αγάπης Τομπούλης (vocals) (με λύρα, ούτι και κιθάρα) | HMV | 12-05-1931 |
| OT 13xx/14xx  | 150-822     | AO 2069         | Τρεις όμορφες γιαν να ανατολιστούν χρόνο - Κουμουν (Α. Τομπούλης) | Δήμητρα Μπιουρντοβάλια & Αντώνης Νταλγκά (vocals) | HMV | xx-11-1933 |
| OGA 156-1     | 151-196(?)  | AO 2220         | Taxim rast (Cassette #9/B Dino Pappas) | Λαϊκή Ωραγία: Χαράλαμπος Μανακόκης, Δημήτρης Σίμος «Σαλονικάδος» (violin), Αγάπης Τομπούλης (ούτι), Ρόζα Εσκεναίδη (ούτι) | HMV | 17-12-1934 |
| OGA 177-1     | 151-197(?)  | AO 2220         | Τσιφτέ-τέλι (Cassette #9/B Dino Pappas) | Δήμητρα Σαλονικίας with Eastern Orchestra: Ανατολικός Στρατός Σέμισος «Σαλονικάδος» (violin), Αγάπης Τομπούλης (ούτι/speech), Ρόζα Εσκεναίδη (speech) | HMV | 04-01-1935 |

Go 3769    GA 7381  Τα διάλεξα στο αφάλλαμα (E. Moraitou) | Ρόζα Εσκεναίδη, Δημήτρης Μανιάλης ("Λαδόπουλο") (violin), Αγάπης Τομπούλης (ούτι) | ODEON | 31-03-1947 |
Go 3768-1  GA 7381  Το Γρί Γρί (S. Peristeris) (tsifte-telli) | Ρόζα Εσκεναίδη, Δημήτρης Μανιάλης ("Λαδόπουλο") (violin), Αγάπης Τομπούλης (ούτι) | ODEON | 31-03-1947 |
Go 4483    GA 7616  Ελλά Δημητριούλλα μ’ έλλα (on LP: A. Τομπούλη) composed for Dimitra, Stavrani’s mother Not to be confused with | Ρόζα Εσκεναίδη (Αγάπης Τομπούλης = ούτι) & Δημήτρης Μανιάλης (γιγάντιος άνθρωπος) | ODEON | 1951 |

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfu-Q_ptEa&feature=related
| Ν 70210 | 21474 (AEPI) | X-80162 | Tafız Xeţâxâr koûrûnt (Taksim Hicazkar Kürdî) | Αγάπιος Τομπούλης | PATHÊ | 1930 (MAN) |
| N 70211 | 21475 (AEPI) | X-80162 | Γεκέλ μπαρασάλουμ (Gel bançalîm) | Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals?) | PATHÊ | 1930 (MAN) |
| N 70208 | 21476 (AEPI) | X-80163 | İsekentêr Mteçayâ (kîstêxêko = kçêbek) (İskender Boğazı dardir geçilmez/ Ben yarımı gördüm) | Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals) | PATHÊ | 1930 (MAN) HUST |
| N 70209 | 21477 (AEPI) | X-80163 | T언기려 쪽소우 (kîstêxêko = kçêbek) (Sunûd. Łaçîkî Orçîstatî) | Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals) | PATHÊ | 1930 (MAN) HUST |
| N 70 ... | 21564 (AEPI) | X-80223 | Yeşil Kürbâga (Yeşil Kurbağa) | Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals?) | PATHÊ | 193x (?) |
| N 70 ... | 21565 (AEPI) | X-80223 | Huzzaam Gazel (Huzzam Gazel) | Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals?) | PATHÊ | 193x (?) |

| Ν 70210 | 21474 (AEPI) | X-80162 | Tafız Xeţâxâr koûrûnt (Taksim Hicazkar Kürdî) | Αγάπιος Τομπούλης | PATHÊ | 1930 (MAN) |
| N 70211 | 21475 (AEPI) | X-80162 | Γεκέλ μπαρασάλουμ (Gel bançalîm) | Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals?) | PATHÊ | 1930 (MAN) |
| N 70208 | 21476 (AEPI) | X-80163 | İsekentêr Mteçayâ (kîstêxêko = kçêbek) (İskender Boğazı dardir geçilmez/ Ben yarımı gördüm) | Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals) | PATHÊ | 1930 (MAN) HUST |
| N 70209 | 21477 (AEPI) | X-80163 | T언기려 쪽소우 (kîstêxêko = kçêbek) (Sunûd. Łaçîkî Orçîstatî) | Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals) | PATHÊ | 1930 (MAN) HUST |
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Please, send your comments, corrections and additions to: recordingpioneers@gmail.com

Fig. 10 Tomboulis playing the same oud as in Fig. 3 & 4
(courtesy Aleka Prassa-Tombouli)