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Music in the first in modern Olympiad Athens in 1896: Cultural and social trends

Abstract. Music, without any doubt, has been one of the main features during both the opening ceremony and on the concert that was given in the end of the first day in the Olympic Games of 1896 in Athens. Actually, there were two new works commissioned for performance during that first day: the *Olympiakos Ymnos* (Olympic Hymn) by Spyridon Samaras in a text of Kostis Palamas and *Pentathlon* by Dionysios Lavrangas in poetry of Ioannis Polemis. Here, we show the cultural and social trends that are implied in these two works and are characteristic of the developing ideologies in Greece of that time. Furthermore, we emphasized our scope towards the impact that these two works had on the contemporary Athenian society of that time.

The Olympic Games have always been a major event and the hosting city attracts worldwide attention for, at least, the duration of the Games. Millions of people around the world watch the opening and closing ceremony eagerly awaiting to be surprised and amazed by the richness, plurality and innovative ideas of the organizers. Obviously music has, or should have, a fair share of this attention. The First Modern Olympiad that was held in Athens in March-April 1896 (the opening ceremony was held on the 25 March/6 April) had a tremendous effect to the lives and everyday life of Athenians.¹

Greece, at that time, was a far smaller country, struggling to develop and become a stable entity. It was only in 1893 when Prime Minister Charilaos Trikoupis declared the country as being officially bankrupt.² Along with financial problems, there were constant and prolonged efforts for liberating areas of Greek speaking populations, still held by the Ottoman Empire. In forthcoming years, Greece enlarged, paying of course the inevitable debt in lives that were lost during warfare, reaching its current proportions during the first decades of the twentieth century, after, of course, suffering the consequences of the Asia Minor expedition.

However, and despite the difficulties and the unstable situation, during a congress that was organised by Baron Pierre de Fredy, Baron of Coubertin, in Paris in 1894 a decision was made that Athens will be the host city for the First Modern Olympiad. Actually, this was the initial congress where the International Olympic Committee was established officially. Obviously, the choice of Athens was primarily a symbolic one, a gesture of political correctness. The country that founded, more accurately offered, the concept of the Olympic Games to the world got to organise the first modern Olympiad.

The economic difficulties that occurred put the whole event at a stake and the whole project might have collapsed if it was not for philanthropists such as Evangelos and Konstantinos Zappas, who left substantial wealth to the Greek State that has been used to fund the Games,³ and Georgios Averof, who contributed by refurbishing the Panathenian Stadium where most of the Games took place.

The glamorous opening was held on the 25 March/6 April 1896 in front of 80,000 people that filled the Panathenian Stadium. Music was to play a key role in this ceremony. The Olympic Committee had decided to commission two works to be composed and performed during the opening day of the Games. The two works commissioned were the *Olympiakos Ymnos* ('Olympic Hymn') by Spyridon Samaras on a text by Kostis Palamas and *Pentathlon* by Dionysios Lavrangas, on a poem by Ioannis Polemis. Furthermore, there was quite a lot of music that was performed during the whole duration of the Games, in various places within the city.⁴ However, our choice here is to focus on the Samaras and the Lavrangas pieces since these were the ones that Olympic Committee officially commissioned. If one thinks that the two pieces have been equally treated though this would have been a mistake. Till today the Lavrangas piece is far less known, to put it mildly, among the art music lovers

although the symbolic meaning of both must have gained them eternal glory. Unfortunately, and as we will see in more detail, the premiere of *Pentathlon* was, to say the least, unsuccessful.

The *Olympic hymn* by Spyridon Samaras has till nowadays a long-lasting appearance to the Olympic Games. It was premiered in 1896 and it was actually abandoned for a long time until the revival and formal establishment of it as the official Olympic Anthem in 1958 by the International Olympic Committee. The piece was performed again in the 1960 Rome Olympic Games and it remains the official opening anthem for all the Olympiads since then. This is a truly long-lasting success for a composer who is relatively unknown in our days. However, this was not the case at that time. In fact Spyridon Samaras was the obvious choice for the commission of the composition of an appropriate anthem since he was the most famous Greek composer of his time. He was based in Italy where he saw many of his operatic works being staged. In 1886 he saw the successful premiere of his opera *Flora Mirabilis* in Carcano Theatre in Milan. After the completion of his new work *Medge* in 1888, this was staged in Teatro Constanzi in Rome with great success, with Emma Calve in the title role. His career seemed to be going very well and he benefited from his association with the Milanese publisher Eduardo Sonzogno, whom he established the Teatro Lirico Internazionale choosing for the opening night Samaras's opera *La Martire* which was staged on 22 September 1894. His works were performed in many lyrical theatres in cities such as: Paris, Monte Carlo, Cologne, Berlin, Vienna, Istanbul, Cairo, Alexandria and many others. He was a well-established composer, often compared to Giacomo Puccini – they belonged to the same age group with Samaras being born in 1861 and Puccini in 1858. He even shared the librettist Luigi Illica who wrote the libretto of *La Martire* with Puccini.⁵

Kostis Palamas, the poet of the *Olympic hymn*, was a ‘less obvious choice’ as the musicologist and composer Haris Xanthoudakis mentions in his chapter titled ‘The *Olympic hymn* and its premiere’ that is included in a recent book about Samaras that was published in 2011 due to the 150th anniversary from the composer’s birth.⁶ At the time of the Olympic Games, Palamas had already published two books with poetry and he has also won first prize for his poem *Hymn to Athena* in the Philadelphian Poetic Competition that was held within the bounds of the Fourth Zappian Olympiad in 1889. It goes without saying that Kostis Palamas was a very promising poet at the time, although there were surely others as well. As Xanthoudakis mentions in another article:

‘In 1895 when Dimitrios Vikelas and Timoleon Philimon were suggesting to the Olympic Committee to commission Kostis Palamas and Spyridon Samaras to write the *Olympic hymn*, the first [Palamas] has just proved beyond and doubt his poetic genius with the collection of poems *Homelands* [Patrides] and the latter has won a position in the international musical scene with his works.’⁷

Vikelas was an active member of the organising committee for the First Olympiad and he was also named as the first president of the International Olympic Committee. Vikelas’s opinion counted and he actually had a great instinct since Kostis Palamas in the later years was to become one of the most acclaimed and important poets of his generation, who put his mark in the Greek poetic world of the twentieth century.

Samaras was and felt like a star, he was the famous, and most pompous, of the two, one can understand this even from an interview that he gave to newspaper *Asty* on 19 March 1896. There, Samaras stated that:

‘I am not able to tell you how long did it take me to compose it. It was sent to me suddenly. I was not much in the mood, by that I mean that I didn’t have the proper inspiration. But suddenly, while I was thinking, something electrified me and within a very short span of time I harmonized it [...] I harmonized it in such a way that it wasn’t that difficult nor too easy. Neither simple nor too serious.’⁸

The *Olympic hymn* was due to be performed during the opening ceremony of the Games. However, one should mention here that the work was already known to certain circles of the Athenian society. It has been already performed with Theodoros Polycratis at the piano during an evening soiree that was held in Parnassos Society in the end of January 1896.⁹ Two symphonic orchestras, different brass orchestras and a large choir comprised an ensemble conducted by Spyridon Samaras for this premiere. A vivid and colourful account of what happened during the performance of the *Olympic hymn* is being given by Dionysios Lavrangas in his memoirs:

‘The official day has finally come. The brass orchestras from different provinces of Greece were in Athens, invited by the Committee. They took their position in the Stadium followed by the Orchestra, comprised by eighty professionals and amateurs, and then came the choir situated around the podium. When the trumpet gave the signal and Samaras, a chubby fellow, lifted his baton, the *Olympic Hymn* with those grandiose chords vibrated the national string in the souls of myriads spectators who have filled the Stadium and with national pride clapped manically the resurgence of Ancient Olympic Games’.¹⁰

The *Olympic hymn* was a success and Samaras triumphed.

As I mentioned earlier, the piece was not in use during the following Olympiads and Samaras later on decided to use it in the opening act of his opera *Rhea*, a work that was premiered in 1908 in Verdi Theatre of Florence receiving good reviews.¹¹ The work was also performed in Berlin and later on in Athens, in 1911, the year when Samaras moved permanently back to Athens. He died just six years after residing to Greece. Interestingly enough, and concerning the interpolation of the *Olympic hymn* in *Rhea*, the composer uses it in the opening choral part retaining the melody and using a libretto in Italian by Paul Milliet. *Rhea* opens with the image of a stadium in the island Chios where the Greek athlete and main character of the work Lysias has just achieved a stunning victory in wrestling over a Saracen named Zakra. The crowd receives his victory with a choral sang in the melody of the *Olympic hymn* and the words talk about the Nation that has as it's ideal the good and the beautiful. This is a clear nationalistic ideal, which, at that time is actually keeping pace with the Big Idea era that was in full force at the time.

About the other work that was commissioned by the Olympic Committee maybe we will need to explain some more details since it remains literary unknown even today, even to the Greek audiences. Actually, there was a revival of *Pentathlon*, a work composed by Dionysios Lavrangas on a text by Ioannis Polemis, on 14 September 2004 when it was performed in the opening day of the Thirty-ninth *Dimitria* Festival in Thessalonica. Symbolism is obvious: 2004 was an Olympic year and Athens, and to an extend Greece, were the hosts for the Olympic Games. The Municipal Symphony Orchestra and the Philharmonic Orchestra of Thessalonica, the Sofia Symphony Orchestra, the Choir of Sofia Radio Broadcasting System and the Thessalonica Choir performed the work, under the direction of Byron Fidetzis. The work requires a tenor and a baritone and a large choir of tenors and basses divided in

two large parts. Moreover, the orchestral forces are comprised of a full orchestra with all woodwinds tripled, full brass section, full strings and a full percussions section.¹² Along with these, there is a need for a small orchestra that will be on the side of the stage comprised by strings, a flute, clarinet, oboe, and two horns and a brass orchestra comprised of two flutes, two oboes, six clarinets, alto and baritone saxophone, two bassoons, three horns, six trumpets, an alticorno, three trombones, a euphonium, a tuba, and a side-drum with cymbals. A very impressive line up that obviously made the work very hard to be played as often as the composer might have wanted.

The history behind the commission is not that difficult for one to trace. Dionysios Lavrangas (1860 or 1864–1940) was appointed artistic director of the Philharmonic Society of Athens in 1894. The Philharmonic Society was one of the two main music bodies that existed at that time in Athens, with the other being the ‘Omilos Philomouson’ - Philomusica Society. The second society was created after the secession of twenty-five members from the Philharmonic Society in 1893. The Omilos Philomouson had a symphonic orchestra and the Philharmonic Society featured a symphonic orchestra, a brass band and a choir. During his time, Lavrangas was able to negotiate and reach a mutually beneficial agreement with Riccardo Boniccioli, the Italian conductor of the Omilos Philomouson Society Symphony Orchestra, in order for the two orchestras to share all the good orchestral players between the two ensembles.¹³

The Olympic Committee chose to assign the coordination of all concerts to the Philharmonic Society because of the existence of an orchestra, a brass band and a choir. Along with that, the Olympic Committee decided to commission a work to the artistic director of the Philharmonic Society, thus Dionysios Lavrangas, a large symphonic work that would be of major proportions. Ioannis Polemis (1862–1924)

was the poet that was commissioned to write the text for this work. Polemis, along with Palamas, Drosinis, Kampas and others, was a member of the New Athenian School,¹⁴ a circle of poets appearing around or after the 1880s and were in favor of the demotiki language, which was the everyday peoples language, a direct opposite to katharevousa, an archaic and made-up idiom that was used by the authorities and some other writers and poets. The language problem had a great impact in all layers of society and it was a problem that tormented the Greek society for several decades. His poetry was full of sentimentalism, touching upon patriotism with a sense of ideal. It worth's mentioning that Polemis' poetry has been chosen by several different composer's such as Kalomiris, Samaras and others.¹⁵

Pentathlon is comprised of an orchestral prelude and two major parts, which are subdivided in different sections. The first part describes the entrance of the athletes to the Stadium and it opens with the ancient ritual of sacrifice and praying to Gods. The second part occurs after 520 bars and is an orchestral interlude leading to a third and final part where the Olympic triumph is sung and the winner is praised. In general, the text focuses on the archaic sentiment of the Games and it is represented by references to the Olympian Gods, and the Nymphs a truly pagan scenery that focuses on the past of the Games. For instance, we will refer to the last verses of the text where one listens to the tenor, representing the Olympic winner, saying: 'and the luminous Country [Greece] will open a special gate for receiving its fortunate Son that represents it'. This actual verse refers to a certain tradition of ancient times, when the Olympic winner was received as a hero and a part of the city's walls was brought down in order for the victorious athlete to pass through. This symbolic act was meant as a reassurance that a city bearing such an athlete, strong in the body and soul, would not need any walls to ward off their enemies.

One might ask why *Pentathlon*? The answer is that during the ancient Olympic games *Pentathlon* (which was comprised of long jump, javelin throw, discus throw, stadion-a foot race and wrestling) was thought to be the most difficult event of all and the athlete who won was thought to be the best athlete in the world. Aristoteles quotes the winner as being ‘the best between the Greeks’.¹⁶

Lavrangas’s *Pentathlon* was programmed to be performed in the concert at the end of the first day of the Games. The concert was performed in the Athens Municipal Theatre and it was comprised by Giacomo Meyerbeer’s Torch Procession; probably these are the four Fackeltänze, 1858, that were intended for Prussian royal weddings), Spyridon Samaras’s ‘Dance of the Flowers’ from his opera *Flora Mirabilis* – this was conducted by the composer while the rest of the programme was conducted by Dionysios Lavrangas, potpourris from Arigo Boito’s *Mefistofele* – performed exclusively by the Corfu Philharmonic, the oldest and most historical philharmonic society in Greece – and on the second part of the concert *Pentathlon* was performed,¹⁷ with a devastating outcome though. The audience was too tired from the whole day and this had as a result *Pentathlon* being performed in front of a very small audience that had the courage to remain for the second part of a very long concert. Lavrangas’s account is illuminating:

‘One by one, the spectators were leaving in discontent complaining and after 90 minutes of rumbling noise from 60 brass and percussion instruments [e.g. he means the Corfu Philharmonic] God pitied us and made them finish their potpourris. Then there were just a few people remaining in the audience. Under those circumstances of heartfelt anxiety, *Pentathlon* was performed and it was meant to pay the price for the sins of the others. The few people who remained, listened to it carefully, maybe some of them even liked it, but

unfortunately they were so tired from the previous torture that they barely clapped and maybe they felt the end of the piece as their liberation.’¹⁸

Actually, the performance itself was not as good either. As Lavrangas confesses in an article of his in 1924 in the newspaper *Eleftheron Vima*

‘the orchestra was not tuned at all. The baritone [...] lost right from the beginning the pace of the recitative and at the last moment the tenor [...] terrified from his own anxiety actually left the stage. I had to skip the second part and finish the first as best as I could in order to finish my torment as well as soon as possible. This was actually a type of cancellation of the performance.’¹⁹

Just for the shake of history, there were other occasion when *Pentathlon* was thought as a possible piece for performance but there was always an unsurpassable obstacle that would cancel its performance. Finally, *Pentathlon* was performed in 2004 as a whole.

To conclude, music commissioned for the First Modern Olympiad was focused around the newly established intellectual forces of the country, who either were making a career abroad (Samaras) or were established in their own country (Lavrangas, Palamas, Polemis). All of them were around the same age, Palamas was thirty-seven years old, Polemis thirty-four years old, Lavrangas thirty-six or thirty-two years old (we are not sure if he was born on 1860 or 1864) and Samaras only thirty-five years old. This process was, in general terms, successful. These intellectuals were meant to play an important role in the years to come, especially Palamas who was proclaimed as a leading figure and inspiration for people such as Manolis Kalomiris, who was meant to establish and lead a nationalistic movement in music in the years to come. On the other hand, Spyridon Samaras was already famous at his time and his

works were performed all over Europe even at the time he was commissioned, Dionysios Lavrangas was meant to become the heart and soul of the Greek Melodrama, the first operatic company that was established in Greece, especially during its third phase from 1898 to 1935 and Ioannis Polemis was the founder and first president of the Etairia Theatrikon Syggrafeon (Theatrical Writers Society). The two works were received differently and unevenly, mainly because of the nature of programming during the first day of the opening ceremony. Lavrangas's piece was doomed to fail and not be established at all not only because of its proportions for an untrained audience nor its musical values but mainly because of the poor programming and false ambition of the committee. On the other hand, the *Olympic Hymn* had the perfect proportions in order to succeed: short in duration, sparkling and pompous for a thirsty audience that wanted something uplifting to show the whole world that Greek art is far from being negligible. The ideological proportions of the two pieces were focused mainly to a glorious past, another important issue for the 1896 Greeks who were desperate to find somewhere to lean on and believe, especially at a time of change that was actually unrevealed just one year after the Athens Olympic Games, in 1897 with a Greek-Turkish War breaking up. In terms of musical matters, archaism was to be abandoned as a means of describing Hellenism in order to be replaced by the nationalistic element that derived by the folk idiom – and not too much from an uncertain and lost antiquity – a folk idiom as it was described by George Lambelet at first and Manolis Kalomiris in a more firm and decisive way in 1908, just a few years after the First Olympiad.

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¹ For an account of what the First Modern Olympiad meant for Greece please cf. Michael Llewellyn Smith, *Olympics in Athens 1896: The invention of the modern Olympic Games* (Athens: Hestia Publications, 2004)

² Smith, *Olympics in Athens 1896*, 60.

³ Cf. the will of Konstantinos and Evangelos Zappas.

⁴ Katy Romanou, Maria Barbaki, and Fotis Mousoulidis, eds. *Greek music in the Olympic Games and the Olympiads (1858–1896)* (Athens: Greek Ministry of Culture, 2004), 15–25.

⁵ For an account of Spyridon Filiskos-Samaras' life cf. George Leotsakos, *Spyros Samaras 1861–1917: The great unjustified of the Greek art music. A biography attempt* (Athens: Benaki Museum, 2013)

⁶ Haris Xanthoudakis, 'The Olympic Hymn and it's premiere', in *Spyridon Filiskos-Samaras, an anniversary volume on the occasion of the 150 years since his birth*. Corfu: Philharmonic Society of Corfu, 2011, 12–32.

⁷ Haris Xanthoudakis, 'Samaras, the Olympics and Rhea'. *Epta Imeres*, 18 April 2004 <<http://news.kathimerini.gr/archive-editions/article/7days/2004/18-04-2004/1282746.html>> (accessed 10 December 2013)

⁸ Romanou et al., eds. *Greek music in the Olympic Games*, 16, and footnote no. 7 in the same edition.

⁹ Stephanie Merakos, 'Music and musicians in the Athens Olympic Games in 1896'. <<http://www.mmb.org.gr/page/default.asp?id=2088&la=1>> (accessed 10 December 2013)

¹⁰ Dionysios Lavrangas, *My memoirs*, new edition (Athens: Govostis, 2009), 113.

¹¹ Cf. also Xanthoudakis, 'Samaras, the Olympics and Rhea'.

¹² I am indebted to musicologist Nikos Poulakis who let me examine the score that he has prepared for the 2004 performance.

¹³ Lavrangas, *My memoirs*, 105–21.

¹⁴ Cf. also Dimaras, Konstantinos Thisseos, *History of the neohellenic literature* (Athens: Ikaros, 1975)

¹⁵ Cf. for instance the score of a song titled *Exomologisis* ('Confession') that was composed by Spyridon Samaras on poetry by Polemis:

<<http://digma.mmb.org.gr/Item.aspx?kkt=GRSON000000164>> (accessed 10 December 2013)

¹⁶ Aristoteles, *Rhetoric*, book 1, chapter 5, ed. J. H. Freese:

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¹⁷ The programme of the concert in Romanou, ed., *Greek music in the Olympic Games*, 21.

¹⁸ Lavrangas, *My memoirs*, 113–4.

¹⁹ Romanou et al., ed., *Greek music*, 22–3.