
Portraits in Modern Greek Music: Roza Eskenazi

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Target marketing as practiced by international record companies as early as the 1890s, created a situation in the history of recorded sound that is seldom addressed by contemporary scholars. Music traditional to numerous cultures around the world was recorded in the country of origin for marketing primarily to receptive diaspora communities, usually in the United States. The American market for foreign-language recordings became so profitable that major companies such as Victor and Edison established studios and factories overseas. Likewise, recordings of ethnic groups living in the U.S. were exported to the home countries. Today scholars commonly classify these commercial records in only two ways: records produced in America are "ethnic" records, while records produced overseas are "foreign" records.

This orientation has little to do with how these records were first perceived either by the European or American companies that produced them, nor the public whose purchases insured their continued production well into the 1960s. That Columbia Records, for example, produced records by Greek musicians in New York expressly for Greeks in Athens, or that Greek performers in Athens recorded songs exclusively for Greeks in New York, is not revealed by the simple division of ethnic and foreign.

Further complications occur with the ethnic/foreign division when we consider the fact that numerous traditional musicians left their home countries and traveled to New York to record. The records may or may not have been released in the performer's country. In some instances, the records from these American recording sessions, as in the case of traditional Cuban music, are now among the finest examples available of that country's recorded music (Bartis 1992: personal communication).

Many foreign records are found in the private record collections of ethnic Americans. Rather than understanding these records as mere nostalgia for the lost homeland, which is what the ethnic/foreign division promotes, the very manner in which the records were first produced prompts us to adopt a more modern position. Once ethnic communities in America are seen as an influential consuming population, much of the music found in private collections takes on new and international meanings. The role of American archives in the preservation of traditional music far from home also becomes more apparent as the identity of "foreign" records becomes redefined as "traditional."

Popularity in the American market undoubtedly influenced the commercial production of music traditions around the world, and this in turn must have affected the records made by traditional musicians. By examining the career and the recordings of arguably the most popular Greek female vocalist, Roza Eskenazi, as a case study, we can begin to understand the dimensions of target marketing on a global basis.

Roza Eskenazi: Her Life and Career

While Roza Eskenazi (ca. 1900-1980) is unquestionably one of the most popular female vocalists in modern Greek music, little is documented about her life and long career. None of the existing published accounts agree about the smallest details of her life. The only single fact upon which all accounts do concur is that Eskenazi was born in the Ottoman Empire of a Jewish family. It is generally understood that at a very young age she began her career as a *defi* player in what has become known as the Greek cafe music scene. In the Constantinople *cafe amans*, Eskenazi soon became one of the premier singers in what writers today term the *Smyrnaic-Rebetic* tradition of Greek song and dance.

Articles on Eskenazi's life and career have appeared in Greek magazines and journals from time to time, but there is no one source of complete biographical information. Eskenazi's own account of her career is found in *Auta Pou Thiamani*, (That Which I Remember), a 1982 reprinting of her interviews with Kostas Hatzidoulis. This dialogue is interesting for Eskenazi's recollections of specific events and performances, and for the photographs of her in the United States after World War II.

Although Roza Eskenazi was one of the most sought-after and biggest-selling female vocalists on Greek 78 rpm records, her musical legacy can be found today only in private collections, a handful of re-release albums issued in Greece and the United States, and in the few American and European archives that hold Greek and Balkan 78 rpm discs.

Aside from re-release albums available in Greece that feature individual songs by Eskenazi, the most useful American album is Martin Schwartz's *Greek-Oriental Smyrnaic-Rebetic Songs and Dances. The Golden Years: 1927-1937*. (Folklyric Records 9033). This album includes two of Roza's most popular songs: "Usak Tsifte-Tell Manes" and "Trava Re Alani." Regrettably, this album is also a perfect example of the lack of direct public access to the early musical traditions of the Balkans and western Anatolia. Since the discs used for this album were drawn from private collections, there can be no follow-up investigation by the interested researcher or music lover.

While the researcher may discover the discographies for commercial records documenting the careers of a host of Balkan and western Anatolian musicians in Richard Keith Spottswood's invaluable seven-volume discography, *Ethnic Music On Records: A Discography of Ethnic Recordings Produced in the United States, 1893 to 1942*, they will not find the name of Roza Eskenazi, since her early recordings were produced in Greece, and the later recordings, made in the U.S. after 1942, were beyond the scope of the discography.

The Archives of Traditional Music has many collections that contain interviews with or musical examples by individual Armenian, Greek, Gypsy, Ladino, Macedonian, and Turkish traditional musicians. As far as commercial records are concerned, there are over 500 78 rpm discs in the Greek Family Record Collection (89-050-C/F). Another two hundred commercial 78 rpm discs are in the Liberty Record Company Collection (89-182-C). Assorted photographs, re-recordings of Greek radio shows, copies of advertisements of commercial records, and over fifty commercial record company catalogs complement the collection. All the songs mentioned in this essay are held by the Archives of Traditional Music.



Demetrios Semsis, Agapios Toumboulis, and Roza Eskenazi.

Cafe Amans and the International Music Business

Roza Eskenazi is recognized as the most popular female vocalist of the *cafe aman* style. Eskenazi recorded her most memorable songs with Demetrios Semsis on violin and Agapios Toumboulis on oud. This style of musical performance developed in the late 1800s in the coastal cities of the Aegean such as Athens, Constantinople, and especially Smyrna, from which Smyrnaic-Rebetic is derived.

It must be emphasized that Roza Eskenazi and all her contemporaries learned and performed their music in the Ottoman Empire. This was a complex multi-cultural world of performance and performers. The musical society was the collective world of Armenian, Greek, Gypsy, Jewish, and Turkish musicians. It is a tribute to Roza Eskenazi's skill as a vocalist, along with the inspired instrumental accompaniment of Semsis and Toumboulis, that the majority of writers on music from the Balkans and western Anatolia consider her performances as typifying the finest expression of the *cafe aman* style ever placed on commercial records.

To gain a true perspective on the talents of this one performer, it must be emphasized that Roza Eskenazi's status in the history of modern Greek music is assured not simply by her *cafe aman* records alone. Eskenazi's legacy of recorded music is an amazing body of work with virtuoso performances in a dazzling array of musical genres and languages traditional to the Balkans and western Anatolia. On the available commercial recordings, Eskenazi sings not only in Greek, but in alternating lyrics of Ladino, Turkish, and even Kurdish.

While there is no way, at present, to know exactly how many records by Roza Eskenazi were released in America, it is safe to estimate between 150 and 250 songs. As popular as she may have been, there are as yet no discographies for Balkan and western Anatolian commercial records produced outside the United States for sale to Greek-Americans. Since records that were intended for an American audience might not have been released in Greece, the problem is even more complicated.

The physical evidence of commercial records found in America will certainly be used in future studies of world music history. In the case of Roza Eskenazi, we know that she visited America after World War II, but there are no comprehensive or reliable written accounts, aside from the Hatzidoulis interviews. We do know of commercial records from post-World War II that attest to her presence in America.

One example is the Kalos Diskos record from the Michalopoulos/Flevaris family collection (89-050-C/F). On the 10" 78 rpm disc, we find on side A, "Ellinipoules Ormorfes," set to a *kalamatianos* dance rhythm. The performers are listed as Roza Eskenazi, vocalist, Kostas Gadinis, clarinetist, and N. Pourporaki as the orchestra leader (Kalos Diskos 306). On side B Eskenazi sings "E Protomagia," a *tsamiko*.

The Role of Archives in Preserving Traditional Music

At present, the social meaning of music from the Balkans and western Anatolia is being distorted. Underscoring this situation is the fact that the first commercial recordings of traditional Greek music of any kind were made in Germany, England, and New York City. The historical importance of these commercial records is

further enhanced by the fact that a wide array of musical genres was outlawed in the Balkans and Anatolia immediately after World War I. Recordings of the forbidden music were made nonetheless, but they could only be sold in other countries. The commercial records in American and British archives are often the only known records available of these outlawed genres.

We could ask for no better example of target marketing in America than the case of Orthophonic Records. Between 1930 and 1932, Tetos Demetriades went to Greece as a field collector for RCA Victor Records. During those two years, he collected over two hundred individual songs. These songs were then selectively released on RCA Victor's Orthophonic label for sale in the United States. Unfortunately, no discography exists for these releases.

How did all the Balkan and western Anatolian records sell in America? By 1940, when the U.S. Bureau of the Census reported Greeks as the 13th largest group in the total popular, Greek records were fifth in total record sales. Greek records had always sold in quantities totally disproportionate to the number of Greeks in the country. A strange consequence of target marketing, especially in the case of Orthophonic Records, is that many of the finest *cafe aman* performances were not heard in Greece until the re-release records of the 1960s and 1970s.

Imported, target-marketed recordings remain in a precarious state of theoretical, and in some cases, funding limbo. Since the imported records are "foreign" records, they are not as highly valued as field recordings or ethnic-American music produced in the United States. This being the case, these records do not fit into the categories that appear on many grant applications. Consequently, these records are often left out of the re-recording cycle that is critical for their long-term preservation.

Combining Ethnic and Foreign to Complete the Picture

The re-orienting of research away from a sharp ethnic/foreign division is long overdue. Those who study Balkan and western Anatolian music will find it necessary to fill in the gaps of ongoing musical developments between the late 1890s and 1937, and become aware of how music was produced by record companies and the traditional musicians.

There was one common market for commercial records of particular ethnic groups, and not two divided geographic zones of unconnected musical production. This calls for a discography that ignores the "ethnic" versus "foreign" divisions, and makes it possible to finally treat the music of a particular group as it was experienced by musicians and audiences—as one body of music. A unified format would help to establish the necessary chronology, not just in modern Greek music, but in continuing investigations into the history of world music.

This essay has dealt with the career of Roza Eskenazi as a case study in the argument for a reconsideration of how scholars categorize—and so theorize about—the divisions between ethnic and foreign music. Still, one may have chosen any of the music traditions first recorded commercially in the 1890s to make the case for a new view on how world music and the international record business have influenced each other.

The following twenty-four songs are all citations taken from either the original 78 rpm records or re-recordings of Roza Eskenazi's music now held at the Archives of Traditional Music. This is meant as only the start of an Eskenazi discography, since she was known to have recorded much more. With the exception of the Orthophonic Records, all the following were produced in Greece, with a Greek-American market in mind.

Roza Eskenazi Discography

- Columbia 56331-F (294437/294438). (A) **E Xasiklou**.
(B) **Sousak-Tsifte-Manes**. Roza Eskenazi, vocal,
P. Toundas, composer.
- Columbia 56362-F (XCO-19786) (B) **Tsoubra Mou To
Mandili Sou** (Syrto). Roza Eskenazi, vocal, A.
Toumboulis, composer.
- Columbia 56382-F (XCO-21547/21548.) (A) **Koui Koui
Atale** (Syrto). (B) **Zaferia Ein' Ta Matia Sou**
(Zembekiko). Roza Eskenazi, vocal, N. Karakosta,
clarinet, Ag. Toumboulis, oud, Salonikos, violi. Ag.
Toumboulis, composer.
- Columbia G-7074-F (131137/131138). (A) **Tsarpina
Emirniopoula**. (B) **To Salvari Tou Kioroglou**. Roza
Eskenazi, vocal, Pentelidou, composer.
- Columbia G-7082-F (131221). (A) **Giftisa**. Roza Eskenazi,
vocal, M. Mixalidis, composer.
- Decca 31147 (101334). **Neo Manavaki**. Roza Eskenazi,
vocal, S. Peristeris, bouzouki, I. Moutavaris,
composer.

- Decca 31257 (GO 4688/04687). (A) **Smyrnia**. (Tsifte telli).
(B) **Horos Kioroglou**. Roza Eskenazi, G. Tabaki, and
A. Toumbouli, vocals, with the S. Peristeri Orchestra.
A. Toumbouli, composer.
- Kalos Diskos 306. (A) **Ellinipoules Ormorfes**. (B) **E
Protomagia**. (Tsamiko). Roza Eskenazi, vocal, Kostas
Gadinis, clarinet, with the N. Pourporaki Orchestra.
- Orthophonic S-317 (B). **To Neo Hanoumaki**. Roza Eskenazi,
vocal. S. Pantelidi, composer.
- Orthophonic S-364-B. **Gia Na Kseris**. Roza Eskenazi, vocal,
G. Tsaounis, tambouri, Toumthuli, outi, P. Tounta,
mandolin, G. Kambissis, composer.
- RCA Victor 38-3062. (A) **To Christianaki**. (B) **E Atsingana**
(Tsefti telli). Roza Eskenazi, vocal, Raftopoulos,
composer.
- RCA Victor 38-3080. (A) **Koftin Eleni Tin Ella** (Tsamiko).
(B) **Soulimiotisa** (Syrto). Roza Eskenazi, vocalist, An.
Stamelos, clarinet, D. Semsis, composer.
- RCA Victor 38-3083. (A) **Chronia Poula Stin Ksentia**.
(B) **Dixos Kaltse Perpatoun** (Tsefte telli). Roza
Eskenazi, vocal, Semsis and Asikis, composers.
- RCA Victor 38-3092. (B) **M'Ekap ses Ameriki**. Roza
Eskenazi, vocal, N. Karakosta, clarinet, D. Salonikios
(Semsis) violi, L. Rouvas, oud. L. Rouvas, composer.
- RCA Victor 38-3131. (A) **Ap' To Vrathi Os To Proi** (Tsefte
telli). (B) **Vre Manges Dio Sti Filaki** (Zembekiko).
Roza Eskenazi, vocal, Karrioti, composer (side A),
and Dzovenos (side B).

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