



## Article

# An experiential description of the tango in interwar Greece (1922-1940) through the life narratives of elderly people in care homes

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### ABSTRACT

The revolutionary rhythm of tango – as well as the simplicity of its dancing steps – contributed to the expansion of its popularity in Greece during the interwar period (1922-1940). The purpose of this paper is to explore the socio-cultural reasons for which tango became a popular dance in Greece during that era. More particularly, the research study had two aims: to present an experiential description of the practice of tango during the interwar period, as well as to explore the emotional experience of nostalgia, triggered by popular Greek tango-songs from the interwar period. Although the Greek tango has not been prominent in Greece as a form of music or dance expression since the 1960s, I carried out a two-year ethnographic research in two homes for the elderly in and outside Athens. By adopting an interactive musical approach followed by discussions with the home residents, I was able to gain information regarding their cultural and social relationship to tango. A total of 30 narratives were collected from the residents. Historical and literary texts (e.g. press articles of that era and music magazines featuring commentaries on the music and dance trends of that age) were used as secondary narrative voices.

### KEYWORDS

tango, Greece, interwar period, care homes, music-evoked memories, nostalgia

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### INTRODUCTION

The wave of dance mania which was expressed in capital cities such as Paris, London and Rome in the 1920s (Baim 2007; Collier et al. 1997; Wiser 1983) encouraged the popularisation of dancehalls and dance academies where the upper and middle classes went in order to learn how to dance the

tango. Nevertheless, in Greece, tango was not heard and danced only in dancing schools or luxury dancehalls but also at feasts or in taverns, where ordinary people would sing with guitars, accordions and violins. Tango was for Greek people a favourite means of entertainment; however, this paper also involves examining the Greek tango as a medium for seeking communication and companionship.

This article consists of three parts. First, the theoretical background that includes a) an outline of the general socio-historical and cultural framework of Greece during the Greek interwar period, b) ethnography as a method of examining tango as a form of cultural expression, and c) a discussion of the theoretical aspects within the emotional context of 'nostalgia'.

The second part comprises the methodology section which describes how the data was collected and analysed as well as the challenges that I faced in my research. It presents the empirical material from the care homes and addresses a number of limitations of the research.

The third and final part of the paper gives a brief description of the results and looks at previous research in the field of ethnomusicology. Finally, it includes some considerations for future research for the wider music and health field.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Historical context

The Greek interwar began in 1922, four years later than in the rest of Europe, for a number of reasons. This period was characterised by intense political, economic and social instability in Greece and is connected with the establishment of two dictatorships, with the appearance of women in the labour force and the rapid urbanisation of Greek society, which was guided by an ideal of Europeanisation. Thus, the urban masses which developed in Athens and other cities of Greece, wanted to reshape the musical life of their country by resorting to European music, which they expected would remove any Byzantine elements and folk songs which connected them with the sad past of four hundred years of Turkish occupation<sup>1</sup>.

The interwar years in Greece were also marked by an intense interest in dance. This period was attributed by the press as being an invaluable form of entertainment for a large part of contemporary Greek society. Within this cultural context, the tango found its peak as a form of expression through dance and Greece, in particular, bore witness to a 'Golden Age' of tango during the 1930s.

### An introduction to ethnography as a method

Considering that tango is a form of both musical and dance expression which some might say no longer bears any resemblance to current aesthetics or social needs, the empirical aspects of the tango culture in Greece were approached via ethnographic research, using residential care homes situated within both urban and rural environments.

The ethnographic field research, the daily and long-term presence of the researcher with a cultural group of people while aiming at understanding and recording their lifestyle, is a distinctive feature of anthropological research (Marcus & Fischer 1986: 18). Through fieldwork, anthropology was fed new material on the basis of which new theoretical and methodological choices were developed. Since the 1920s and until recently, ethnographic field research with participatory observation remains a basic method of anthropological analysis that includes the following key features (Gefou-Madianou 1999): a) it enables the ethnographer to observe and interpret experiences and opinions that would otherwise remain unknown, and b) it is a method to 'discover' new theoretical tools which were not known in advance but emerged through participant observation.

A key issue associated with the anthropological method of field research is that a large part of the research process is guided by the theoretical interest of the researcher in a fixed phenomenon or problem. Therefore, we could conclude that ethnographic fieldwork is a method that is unique and subjective, as the results of the description of the examined musical-cultural phenomenon vary according to the sector from which the scientist hails, the questions submitted, and the theoretical framework that has been shaped by the aforementioned scientist.

### Nostalgia and memory

Popular tango-songs of the interwar period which the elderly were able to recognise and sing, triggered various emotions of which nostalgia was most frequent. Nostalgia has been characterised as a complex and "bittersweet" feeling (Janata et al. 2010; Van den Tol & Ritchie 2014), as it may cause a mixture of sadness and joy, insecurity and desire. Often, but not necessarily, nostalgia is accompanied by autobiographical memories (Janata, Tomic & Rakowski 2007; Janata et al. 2010; Van den Tol & Ritchie 2014) and an emotional response is often caused by listening to

<sup>1</sup> From 1453 until 1830 when Greece gained its independence from the Ottomans, the Greeks had little contact with Western music and were familiar only with Byzantine hymns and Greek folk songs.

famous songs. Hearing songs from the past can therefore trigger mixed feelings and memories of a certain time period and/or a person, event or location.

Exploring the narratives of the elderly based on the theory of nostalgia seeks to highlight two things: a) ideas, attitudes, memories, events and reviews related to the practice of tango during the interwar period, and b) nostalgia as an emotional experience for the mental and physical wellbeing and quality of life for the elderly.

The theoretical approach of 'nostalgia' has been important in this research, as it takes into consideration the comprehension and interpretation of the ways elderly people manage the passing of time emotionally, especially as they may spend the last years of their life in an institution from which – at least in most instances – there is no way to return to the family environment.

As a concept, the word 'nostalgia'<sup>2</sup> implies loss and refers to a world of yesterday that serves, as far as the subject is concerned, as a "safety valve" (Tannock 1995: 456). This way of approaching the past transfers the subject from an unstable present to a stable past, thus expressing the belief that back then, the function of life and human relationships were better. Benveniste and Paradellis, in their article '*Memory and historiography*', in investigating the processes of memorising and the complex issues that arise regarding the role of memory in society and intellectual life, write the following about nostalgia:

"The past we represent or (re)construct is always more coherent than what actually happened. Our nostalgia celebrates a clarity that fights the chaos and the uncertainty of our days" (Benveniste & Paradellis 1999: 23).<sup>3</sup>

Nostalgia can be interpreted sometimes as a negative, and other times as a positive emotion. As a negative emotion, it causes a person to feel melancholia and sadness, upon realising that the past is definitely lost. It is often connected with emotions such as, for example, misery, rage, desperation, hatred and shame. It is also examined as something pathological, likely caused by brain

damage, as a flight from reality, as a denial of time or denial of history's effects on the present (Boym 2007; Tannock 1995; Thompson 2000).

As a positive emotion, nostalgia can help a person redefine his/her identity and review issues that give rise to concern. In his article entitled '*Nostalgia critiques*', Tannock (1995) notes that nostalgia is a legitimate way for constructing and approaching not only the past, but the future as well, since it can bring significant social changes to a person's private and social life. Based on this view, nostalgia can help a person in the following ways: first, to reinforce their self-esteem so as to adjust more easily to the rapid changes happening in society and their interpersonal relationships; and second, to reinvigorate human bonds by connecting yesterday with today. Through participating in activities reinforcing socialisation, nostalgia can also strengthen the belief of sensitive social groups that they too are a factor contributing to the development of societies. How nostalgia is approached determines how significant it is in matters examining the past and memory. One of its basic aspects, as was mentioned before, is that the negative experiences of life are usually filtered and the past is recalled in a manner that is better than what really was the case in the first place.

Investigating the relationship between memory and emotion is a complex enough matter that transcends the aims of this study.<sup>4</sup> However, based on the theory that "memory is not merely a passive storage space for past events, but it changes and redirects itself from the needs of the present" (Kyriakidou-Nestoros 1988: 235), it was evidenced in this study that the idealisation of yesterday's mode of entertainment was done from the standpoint of the present era. This way, the past was considered to be "honest" and "romantic", in contrast with the current "vulgar time, where young people only dance having sex on their minds". All of the elderly persons involved in the study concluded that the beauty of the time they lived in was a result of "purity" and "kindness" instilled by the society of their own time (Koufou 2011: 265).

Moreover, the theoretical approach to nostalgia created further concerns surrounding the complicated relationship between memory and emotion, which emerged only after the end of this research. As noted by Schulkind, Hennis and Rubin

<sup>2</sup> Seremetaki (1997:35-37) clarifies that the Greek term *νοσταλγία* is "vastly different than the notion of romantic sentimentalism" indicated by the English term nostalgia. In Greek, the verb *νοσταλγώ* is a composite of *νοστώ* and *αλγώ*, and it signifies pain, longing or yearning to return to one's homeland.

<sup>3</sup> All direct quotes from Greek literature have been freely translated here.

<sup>4</sup> The importance of memory for oral history is undoubtedly of great significance. It is in the author's interest, in future research, to strengthen the present methodology through a dialogue involving oral history and cultural memory.

(1999) in their article entitled *'Music, emotion, and autobiographical memory: They're playing your song'*, the feeling of nostalgia may also express the pleasure felt by the residents in their efforts to remember incidents and persons from their distant past. Therefore, it is difficult to clarify "whether the emotion elicited the memory, or the memory elicited the emotion" (Schulkind, Hennis & Rubin 1999: 953).

### **Voices of the elderly persons: The "bittersweet" emotional experience of music-evoked nostalgia**

One female resident, having connected nostalgia with dancing and youth, recognised the positive effect of dancing as a way of managing reality:

"I remember the period of tango with nostalgia. Although it was a hard time, when you're young and healthy and there's a spark in you, things come to you differently, you're stronger when you face hardships."

The following narratives underscore the differences in the modes of entertainment and the behaviour differences between the old and young generations. This highlights, according to the elderly, the superiority of the past and the positive interpretations of nostalgia:

"Now they dance and kiss and all that. Back then no one was allowed to do that, it was all done in secret."

"Yes, yes. It was romantic back then, relationships were more pure."

"Back then, we'd have fun in a brotherly manner, now these things don't exist anymore [...] now, everything's done in order to get some."

"Today, there's alienation. There's no fun [...] people don't have fun in their homes."

Nostalgia for dancing among the elderly was stronger when a bereaved person would become entangled in their narrative. For some, realising the loss of that person from their lives meant either distancing themselves from dance and/or music, or developing feelings of insecurity about the present. The following narratives of elderly persons show some negative ways of approaching nostalgia:

"Oh yes, yes. It was nice. Romantic. Everything's there, but what good are they? [...] I long for my companion above everything else [...] we lost everything."

"Memories have faded, they're all gone. It only gets you so far [...] what we do now is the problem."

"Dancing was all we had [...] now, these years have gone. We got nothing. No dancing, not our loved one. It's best not to remember these things."

The past was used by several elderly persons in order to stress that "in their time...", meaning the time when they danced and sang, and they were young. Therefore, for them, tango represented the carelessness of their youth, and it was also connected with personal experiences that sometimes had a pleasant ending, although sometimes they did not. Nostalgia for their own past lives increased through symbolisms and meanings accompanying the practice of tango; these also had effects on their later lives:

"When I went out dancing, I had a fling with a musician. He then came to me and asked me to dance. He was a young man, tall and thin. He lived in Pagrati, and his father was a wing commander. I mean, he came from a rich family. All the time we were dancing tango, he talked to me. This was how we met. I wore a black dress with a white collar, my golden cross, and flat shoes. My hair was long and brown-blondish. Then I fell sick, and he came to my house to see me and meet my parents. When I got better, I visited his house on the last night of the Carnival season, there was going to be a dance there, too. There, he introduced me to his father as his fiancé, but his father threatened him that if he continued seeing me, he would disown him. He owned, you see, two apartment buildings. After that, we broke up for a while, until the war, and then we completely drifted apart."

"My boyfriend and I met at a party. It was really nice [...] I had fallen in love with him by talking to him during tango, and I wanted for us to tie the knot."

By emphasising their emotional relationship with music and dancing, the elderly attempted to recreate, in their opinion, ideal human relationships. Friendly gatherings in houses, carefree fun either in dance schools or in neighbourhood dancehalls, assumed the form of images; images imprinted on their memory, remembering the "kindness" of people and the "moral" (or not) behaviour during dancing. For others, the uninterrupted link they had built throughout their lives with dance and music was interpreted as a sign of life, and it became manifest with the idea of organising dance events such as galas inside the care home.

Claiming that the sorrows of life are more than its joys, they narrated that dancing was not only a significant part of their past life, but of their present life as well, since it helped them deal with old age with optimism. Contrary to stereotypical views that old age is a process of retreating from life from both social and cultural environments (Thompson, Itzin & Abendstern 1991), many of the elderly persons interpreted their situation as a challenge, due to the fact that they needed, more than ever, to respond decisively to the organic and psychological changes they were experiencing. As a result, those who considered the past as residing in the present, attempted to render the emotion of nostalgia in the bodily movement of dance.

## METHODOLOGY

### Data collection and analysis methods

The field research that began in February 2008 and concluded in the autumn of 2009 was centred on two care homes, in Athens and Nafplio. These two institutions were selected to establish a picture of tango practice in the interwar years in Greece, and involved the playing of popular songs of that era on my accordion. There were five visits in 'Athens',<sup>5</sup> each lasting approximately an hour and a half. The Athens home consisted of five 'wings', where elderly residents were housed according to their age, mental, physical and financial conditions. In 'Nafplio' four visits were made, each of them having the same duration as in 'Athens'.<sup>6</sup> The age of residents ranged from 72 to 94 years old, and they were all mobile except for one elderly woman who used a cane.

Although the idea of field research in care homes seemed to be quite interesting at first, my beliefs about old age were, to paraphrase Proust, "more vague than any other form of reality" (Beauvoir 1973: 12). The elderly represented the 'Other' to me. My visits taught me to realise that my definition of old age came from me, the observer, and it was grounded upon stereotypes I had embraced, involuntarily or not, regarding the experience of old age. The time I spent with the elderly residents proved to be of great value to me. I finally adopted the view suggested by Thompson,

Itzin and Abendstern in the book '*I Don't Feel Old: The Experience of Later Life*' (1991) in which they state that the age during which the biological decay of an individual commences is also dependent on that individual's overall stance against the challenges of life.

My proposal to entertain elderly persons with dance music from the interwar period was met with enthusiastic approval from the social workers in charge of each care home, who also participated themselves in the research. It is thanks to their interest that I had the opportunity to converse with remarkable and sensitive people, which enabled me to capture their memories about tango and the overall music and dance atmosphere of the interwar era.

Our musical meetings were held in large rooms where the elderly people eagerly waited for the music sessions to begin. They would usually get their daily meals in these rooms; at other times of the day the rooms were used for musical entertainment or other activities along with coffee. In the first instance I noticed – both in Athens and in Nafplio – that men chose to sit together on one side of the room and women on the other side. Sitting in a semicircle with me in the middle, however, I could gain visual contact with everyone.

The tango-songs used as a methodological tool in this investigation were selected using two criteria: a) the popularity generated by the press and music magazines of that era; and b) the narratives of known Greek composers, singers and lyricists who have dealt with tango in the interwar and/or post-war years.

Having prepared about forty dance songs from the interwar period, my aim was to encourage participation through singing and/or dancing, to evoke memories around the music and dance movements of a time gone by – those of the years of their youth. In their time, they said, they "experienced happiness, a bliss that will never come back, ever". They "had fun in a way that doesn't exist anymore, you won't see it anywhere", they "respected moral values ignored by the youngsters of today". In their time, "people fell in love through dancing". Singing and dancing, as some of them pointed out, "was their entire life".

Other than the entertainment value, discussions with the elderly revolved around topics such as:

- a) Their relationship with music – whether they learned to play a musical instrument or not, their familial environment with music.

<sup>5</sup> From this point onwards, I will refer to the homes in Athens and Nafplio using the terms 'Athens' and 'Nafplio' respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Other than my planned visits to Athens, I also took part in several excursions during the summer of 2009 as a musician.

- b) Musicians and singers – their impressions of Greek and/or foreign musicians they had listened to.
- c) Their relationship with dancing – which dances they preferred, whether they had taken dance lessons or not and where they took such lessons (at a dance school or at home), the reasons why they liked tango.
- d) Their views about our time – how they evaluate their era and its entertainment as compared to that of today's young persons.
- e) Matters of behaviour at dance schools – whether specific codes of behaviour existed.

The discussions that followed the music, due to illnesses and/or psychological states, were sometimes done at group level and at other times individually.

The presence and active participation of the care staff in this musical activity was particularly important for the following reasons: for their help in filming the reactions of the elderly to the songs they heard;<sup>7</sup> to ensure the physical integrity of the elderly; and mainly, for the continuous emotional support and encouragement they provided regarding the importance of interactive music. Thus, their active involvement in live vocal music enabled the care staff to acknowledge the benefits of an interactive musical approach. It was noted that certain familiar songs could tell the story of an individual or of a particular period in their lives while others brought to mind meaningful people, places and/or strong emotions. The songs also promoted verbal expression (e.g. individuals who didn't speak very much discovered not only that they could sing, but they could also recall lyrics accurately and confidently) and non-verbal reactions (some elderly would nod their heads and tap their feet to the music or they would just sit with their eyes closed rocking back and forth). Gradually, a shortlist of songs which the elderly demonstrated as being very important and/or meaningful was collected. These songs were sung at the same tempo as they were originally recorded and were played on the accordion. Each song was played twice with all verses, so that everyone could have the opportunity to listen, to remember and to participate.

"You know this song '*The Last Tango*'? Well, let me sing it for you, my girl, maybe it'll come back to you."

In Nafplio as well as in Athens, it was interesting to observe the bodily reactions as, on several occasions, the elderly would get up to dance without any assistance and would form either same-sex or heterosexual dancing couples. The elderly people with better physical health were pleased to be given the opportunity to remember the four basic steps of the European tango. From our very first meeting, in both care homes, those who preferred to sing while dancing immediately stood out. Although there were some elderly persons who did not dance at all, the camera recorded their calm, smiling faces and their humming. One female resident claimed she did not dance out of embarrassment; despite the fact that she knew all the songs by heart and she admired those who danced, she refrained from dancing because of her age.

"My age doesn't allow me to carry on like that. It's a shame, my girl, for me to dance with all those years on my back!"

Throughout the visits I made to Athens and Nafplio, I noticed that women were more willing to dance than men, sometimes with help from the care staff, other times on their own, making short turns around themselves or along the room and also raising their arms. One female resident, in particular, was so excited with the prospect of dancing that, after our first meeting, she would show up dressed for the occasion, with lightly painted lips and wearing black low-cut patent leather shoes, her "dancing shoes", as she would point out. It was observed that when elderly persons danced more, either with each other or with the help of the care staff, their bodily movements augmented their mood for verbal communication. In Nafplio, especially, several residents who knew each other from before often completed each other's narrations, thus encouraging other residents to join in.

On one occasion I visited with two colleagues, a pianist and a professional singer, in order to see if there were different emotional and/or bodily reactions. For that particular event, many new songs were included in the repertoire. It is interesting to note that the elderly people became enamoured by the professional singer. As a result, communication between the elderly was enhanced and significant memories which could conceivably have got lost were recovered.

The elderly responded with great enthusiasm to the idea of talking about their music and dance experiences. Melodies of songs and tangos such as, for example, '*Cruel heart (Skliiri kardia)*' (1935), '*Withered are the violas and violets (Maramena ta*

<sup>7</sup> All visits were videotaped with the help of the care staff.

*yulia kai oi violes*)' (1935), *'To love and not be loved (Na agapas kai na min agapiesai)*' (1936), *'The fishing boat tango (To tango tis psaropoulos)*' (1940), were songs that most residents believed could express their own lives and emotions.<sup>8</sup>

The willingness of the elderly to talk about their music and dance experiences was mostly influenced by two factors: a) the selection of songs which acted as a beacon to awaken memories and emotions; and b) the familiar and friendly relationships that were built up over time. One female resident, for example, wanted to give me advice on the "dangers and evils" of life every time we met and before saying goodbye. She also expressed a desire for me to devote some time to her, in order to discuss privately my life in Athens, my family, my ambitions, my dreams. Over time, saying goodbye became more and more emotional:

"When will you come back, my girl?"

"Should we wait for you tomorrow?"

"That was fun! You'll come again, won't you? Don't forget us"

A familiar environment was slowly established, one where songs and dance acquired a special emotional value, both for the elderly and for myself. Known melodies played with the rhythm of tango and other popular songs from that era, such as waltzes and foxtrots, allowed the elderly to use music as a "memory bank" (Chatwin 1987: 108) in order to awaken themselves, reconnect with their past, and remember with their bodies.

The field research in care homes went smoothly with respect to communication, yet I sometimes faced difficulties at an emotional level, since the effort to remember past experiences would 'awaken' feelings of sadness, fear, insecurity and/or social alienation within some of the elderly. In such instances, a touch, a gesture, a smile, a cheerful talk proved to be my most valuable and irresistible allies. However, I made the decision to cut short my research in Nafplio after the fourth visit, due to an unforeseen event – the death of a female resident, who was the 'soul' of Nafplio. She was the first to start singing and the last to stop dancing. Her loss had a significant effect on the psychology of the other residents, to the extent that their mood for

singing and dancing was greatly diminished. On that day, the elderly man with whom she usually danced asked me:

"And who am I going to dance with now, Aggeliki?"

The awkwardness I felt at that time meant I could not find the proper words to soothe the sorrow of that man. The emotions he felt affected him so much that he withdrew to his room for a very long time.<sup>9</sup> A social worker suggested at what was to become the final session that my work was somehow pointless, since she felt that the music could no longer preserve the equilibrium of the elderly.

### Methodological limitations and future considerations

In the two years I spent visiting the elderly, I sought to create a pleasant environment through singing as well as a socio-cultural context of communication. However, as the approach and understanding of a musical phenomenon based on a particular theory, "not only shapes the research process but also determines its problems" (Gefou-Madianou 1999: 252), I often wondered about a) the recording and analysis of their narratives, b) points of their narratives that may have not been interpreted sufficiently, and c) if the questions submitted unconsciously guided their answers. Even if a part of the research process was influenced and guided by a certain theoretical interest, I found that by sharing memories and expressing emotions through music, the elderly people themselves shaped the survey research design, problems and its conclusions.

The results from the ethnographic research in both care homes have revealed the importance, according to this author, of identifying how the elderly praise their life experiences with tango. Just as Myerhoff, in her book *'Number Our Days'*, (1980) depicts the way of life for several Jewish elderly people in Los Angeles, in order to underscore the importance of the narrative experience, elderly nostalgic narratives in this ethnographic research are not being shown to reconstruct history, showcase the accuracy of events or the objective "ethnographic truth" (Clifford & Markus 1986: 7; Merriam 1964: 49) about beliefs and mindsets of that era or, the music and dance

<sup>8</sup> Discussions with the elderly would usually last one hour, and the musical part would last for approximately 30 minutes. However, based on their moods, the entertainment part would occasionally be longer or shorter.

<sup>9</sup> Even after I completed my visits to both care homes, I continued to be in contact with the social workers so that I could be informed about the residents' wellbeing.

memories of the elderly, but to point out the subjective experiences and, most importantly the mental state associated with the recollection of memories. In addition, using nostalgia as a catalyst to evoke memories and emotions (positive and/or negative), the interest of this study focused on whether the elderly were able to escape from the inevitable comparison between past and present, therefore drawing the sense of nostalgia and mental strength for the future.

Some methodological limitations of this research identified are as follows: as the ethnographic research was limited to only two care homes, future research would include conducting participant observation in care homes in other cities of Greece, which will bring to the surface more information on the historical and social transformations of tango. Moreover, the collection of a larger sample of this social group and the design of a sample survey with a questionnaire (thereby using a quantitative research approach) that will be available, for example, in different care centres around Greece, will lead to more data in order to draw broad conclusions regarding the examined musical phenomenon.

Another limitation of this study relates to the selection of tango-songs used in the care homes. Although most of the elderly people were familiar with the songs, they were not chosen by them. Related research undertaken around the relationship between music, emotions and autobiographical memories (Van den Tol & Ritchie 2014), has indicated that self-selected music rather than experimenter-selected music, may cause intense emotional reactions and more detailed autobiographical memories. However, this study did not examine whether the song-hearing exclusively selected by the elderly could be associated with specific individuals and/or events of the past.

It is also argued that popular songs which raise strong emotions are recalled in memory better than songs which trigger mild feelings (Schulkind, Hennis & Rubin 1999). This research, while considering the relationship between music and the emotional profile of nostalgia by listening to popular songs from the years of their youth, could not prove that the elderly were able to remember all the lyrics of the tango-songs, their titles or the names of the singers. Furthermore, songs that they liked more than others strengthened their will to remember some lyrics, without necessarily engaging memories around the practice of tango. It would be interesting, therefore, for future research to explore whether the frequent repetition of a single turn of popular tango-songs would lead to different results

in the degree of recollection of events, people and ideas and in relation to the historical, social and cultural context of this musical and dance expression.

## FINDINGS

Research in Athens and Nafplio proved that tango was danced in the interwar years in many places around Greece (Xanthi, Thessaloniki, Volos, Leucada, Ithaca, Patras, Athens, Nafplio, Mani, Syros, Skopelos and Crete), and that it was also danced by Greeks from Egypt and Constantinople. Based on their place of origin and their own histories, the music they requested consisted mainly of traditional folklore or popular songs, as well as some classical and light music.<sup>10</sup> Those who had a European music education were explicit in their renouncement of bouzouki,<sup>11</sup> claiming they preferred light music. Others said that they listened to zeimbekiko,<sup>12</sup> traditional and light songs with equal pleasure. Several female elderly persons originating from Caesarea, Egypt and Constantinople had grown up dancing karsilama<sup>13</sup> and European dances, but they also said that they wanted to learn more dances.

This wave of dance mania in the interwar years, as became evident from the narratives of the elderly, engulfed not only urban centres, but also the rural areas. An article in the newspaper *Elefthero Vima*, dated 1923, comments on the intense dance activity of the era: "And they all dance, regardless of age and profession [...] artists, seamstresses, office, bank and ministry typists". Still, the dance mania of the time was not always praised by the press.<sup>14</sup> The first negative critique in Greece about the close contact of bodies in the tango was written as early as 1914 in the

<sup>10</sup> The term "Greek light song" refers to a particular kind of song that rose to prominence in Greece during the 30-year period from 1930 to 1960, with the creative support of many Greek artists. Light songs, both with regard to their melody and their arrangements, are based on Western standards and their lyrics are mostly about love.

<sup>11</sup> The bouzouki, the guitar and also the baglamas, are the main instruments used in rebetiko. Rebetiko is a genre of Greek music played in Greek tavernas.

<sup>12</sup> Zeimbekiko is a Greek folk dance.

<sup>13</sup> Karsilama is a Turkish couple dance that is also known in Greece under the name Antikrystos.

<sup>14</sup> *Elefthero Vima*, 29.06.1923 and 20.12.1924.

newspaper *Proodos*.<sup>15</sup> Six years later, the newspaper *Kathimerini* protested about the lack of public concerns given the reality faced by the country, remarking the need for people to “stop thinking only with their feet and put their logic into action, if only so they could succeed in tidying up the mess they are in”.<sup>16</sup>

“Singing and dancing was our entire life”, “Dancing was in my blood”, “We used to dance almost every day”, “Youngsters back then wouldn’t meddle with politics, they preferred to dance instead”, “Dancing was all we had”, “It was a crazy period, yes, yes [...] we were crazy for dancing”.<sup>17</sup> These – and other similar phrases – were how the 30 elderly persons described their relationship with dancing. Motivated by their memories, they reached back into their childhood/teenage years and recalled how their parents would sing light songs from the era and play traditional and European melodies on the clarinet or the violin. There was only one resident from a village outside Nafplio who said that he would go only occasionally to summer festivals and fairs. Although he himself didn’t dance, since “his heart didn’t seek festivals” as he put it, he still did listen to some European music.

Four out of 30 residents interviewed lived in rural areas and were employed in agriculture. Their isolation and low income contributed to their lack of a high level of education and/or exposure to Western European culture. The majority (24 out of 30) of the elderly residents came from cities with stable employment and education opportunities. They included retail workers, teachers and craftsmen, who sought to learn a musical instrument as well as traditional Greek and European dances. Their economic status also enabled them to attend musical and dance events which took place in Athens or Thessaloniki. Eminent artists of the interwar era included names such as Attik, Gounaris, Giannidis and Bianco. The remaining four residents who had the required finances (a captain, a professional pianist, a professional dance teacher and musician and a

professional dancer), could also afford a personal gramophone and records. Often, they would organize dances in their homes, thus contributing to the dissemination of Greek Westernised music (dominated by the tango).

Furthermore, for these four elderly persons music and dancing were their chosen professions. Their narratives are of great interest for two reasons: firstly, because we can clearly see how their social and educational levels greatly facilitated their professional involvement with music and dance; and secondly, because their choice of profession also reflected the beliefs and mindsets of the Greek interwar society in relation to artistic careers.

A male resident (a former captain) narrated how he had begun his music career as an amateur drum player in the community band of Nafplio, and he subsequently became a bandmaster. He knew how to dance traditional and European dances of which he stated preference for the tango. A woman narrated that she had taken lessons in piano and European dances from a dance teacher in Crete, and she subsequently taught piano and dancing. At the same time, she expanded her knowledge of music by learning the mandolin and the violin. In the Athens sessions, I had the opportunity of having a lengthy discussion with a man who had been a professional piano player and had collaborated with some famous Greek composers, namely Theodorakis, Chatzidakis and Oikonomidis. He had studied classical piano at the Music School of Volos, but soon turned to jazz music, playing in luxury hotels and cruise ships. He narrated that his professional relationship with music was the reason for his broken marriage, since his father-in-law treated him with contempt as a “*musicante*”, a second-rate musician. He nevertheless managed to work abroad as a musician, ensuring a good pension for his old age. With respect to dancing, he claimed that he knew plenty of Latin and European dances “inside out”. He stated that his father was one of the first dance instructors in Volos having studied European dances and tap dancing in Paris in the 1920s. Finally, there was a female resident who had participated in shows in Delfoi and Epidavros as a professional dancer. However, she narrated that she had to stop due to intense disputes with her mother concerning moral dilemmas related to that profession. Subsequently, she changed careers to teaching English.

Although some elderly persons claimed that “all dances are nice” such as, for example, waltzes or foxtrots, and that “each dance has its own grace”, most of them talked about the superiority of the

<sup>15</sup> More specifically, the newspaper *Proodos* accused Zappeion National Girls’ School for teaching the immoral dance of tango. *Mousiki*, issue 25, 1914.

<sup>16</sup> *Kathimerini*, 15.03.1920.

<sup>17</sup> In 1936 in particular, an article of the magazine *To Tragoudi* comments on the fact that dancing was the most important mode of entertainment of Athenians, and that, furthermore, there were not enough dancehalls to satisfy the desires of dance enthusiasts. *To Tragoudi*, No. 24, 11.1936.

tango. For the elderly women, more specifically, tango was the dance of love, of romance or of the aristocratic class. Men, for their part, emphasised the sensationalism of tango and the pleasure they felt embracing a female body. With or without close physical contact, tango was the “best”, the “ideal” dance for two reasons: first, because it would calm them from listening to “annoying and loud jazz music”;<sup>18</sup> and second, because it combined sensual music and simplicity of steps with bodily and verbal communication. The phrase “don’t you prefer if we discuss it while dancing” was firmly connected with the practice of tango, and for many residents who were active participants in the dance movement of that era, words, glimpses and gestures while dancing were all a “part of the program”.<sup>19</sup> Almost all residents were able to recall positive impressions left by the orchestras of the era,<sup>20</sup> some of which would diversify their programmes by adding traditional and European songs:

“Oh my, yes! Songs were all mixed up. Bouzouki and violins and clarinets. After zeimbekiko, we would turn to ‘hugging’ (tango).”

Already from the 1920s, tango in Greece was danced in dance schools or ‘Dance Academies’, as they were otherwise called. By the end of the 1950s these had seen significant levels of attendance. The profession of dance teacher was regarded as an ideal occupation during the interwar period; in 1926, the press commented on the constant rise in the number of dance schools.<sup>21</sup> Dance teachers regarded their profession as a sort of civil service, winning the favour and appreciation of middle and high social classes. Dance schools weren’t necessarily places that anyone could frequent, since in several places in Greece they were a place of gathering for sophisticated people, with a certain social and financial standing. A female resident who originated from Crete narrated the following:

“Villagers wouldn’t go to dance schools. It was a place for fine people, wealthy people! It was no

place for tramps. The door would shut and you would dance in peace. You wouldn’t be harassed, and they wouldn’t talk to you, tell you dirty stuff.”

Nevertheless, tango dancing in Greece was not merely a subject of dance schools; it also took place in houses, where friends and relatives would get together so they could sing and dance. In fact, many residents thought this type of entertainment to be quite common, due to the fact that on the one hand, dance schools were expensive and on the other hand, they didn’t think that they would have a better time by visiting a dance school or a dancehall. As such, there were many who had learned European dances the old-fashioned way, which was by going from house to house. A resident originating from Crete provided a narrative about how someone could learn how to dance the tango in rural areas:

“We had fairs in village squares or houses, and so we got to learn the dances [...] the best nights were in houses. I know this one, this one’s better, he knows this thing [...] these were great nights. We sang, we danced and we learned. There was communication, and this was something that stayed with us later on in life [...].”

The choice of the ‘old-fashioned’ way also allowed parents to observe, from head to toe, the manners and the moral standards of male guests. As such, dancing was frequently a pretence so that a mother could deduce who the best husband would be for her daughter, a motherly method, which in most cases would be met with disagreement from the daughter.<sup>22</sup> Several elderly women who had similar experiences did not hesitate to express their annoyance about the pressure exercised on them to settle down through marriage. Moreover, they narrated that dancing was not always a pleasant activity, due to the fact that girls would often quarrel as to who would get to dance first and with whom. Some were forced to dance with each other; as one resident commented, “what were we supposed to do, just sit there and look at each other?”

There were a few residents who learned to dance not in a dance school or at a house in the company of friends, but in a schoolyard or village square. One resident from Nafplio narrated that when she was about ten years old, there was a young schoolteacher who taught traditional and European dances to all classes of her school. This is why she thought she didn’t need to go to a dance school to improve her technique. Yet later on, when

<sup>18</sup> *Mousiki Zoi*, Year Two, Issue 1, October 1931.

<sup>19</sup> *Elefthero Vima*, 15.07.1923, 22.02.1931, 2.03.1938.

<sup>20</sup> The first Argentinean orchestra with Eduardo Bianco as a conductor came to Greece on 3.11.1929 and was considered to be the biggest musical event that ever took place in Athens. Bianco’s appearances in theaters and famous dancehalls of that era were essential in increasing the popularity of tango in Greece. Cinema and the radio also played an important role in this respect.

<sup>21</sup> *Elefthero Vima*, 9.02.1926.

<sup>22</sup> *Elefthero Vima*, 9.02.1926.

she was married and went to dance school her husband would often make displays of jealousy. Still, according to residents from both care homes, such displays of jealousy were something women would also do. A wife or a fiancée, by discreetly observing her husband's dance behaviour, could sense whether this was just a dance or something more. One female resident narrated the following: "I didn't care for either men or women. I just did my thing, dancing and flirting".

Several elderly women claimed that it was "embarrassing" for a girl to deny a dance to an unknown boy, while others chose to say the 'big yes' or the 'big no' on the basis of a boy's external appearance:

"If I didn't like the way he looked, or I didn't like him in general, I wouldn't get up [...] I'd tell them that my feet hurt. If someone I liked came close to me, then my pain would suddenly go away."

Other elderly women, those originating from Ithaca and Constantinople, narrated that whenever they would go dancing, they didn't feel "free" to dance with young men they didn't know, since all attendees' eyes would turn to them in an instant. For this reason, they preferred not to make new acquaintances on the dance floor, but rather in the neighbourhood pastry shop, in order to avoid comments that were likely to place either themselves, or their parents, in an unfavourable position. A resident narrated the following:

"Boys would sit at one table and girls at another table, all together [...] when my boyfriend wanted to say hello, he would pretend that he was straightening his hair [...] you see, things weren't free back then, and a lot of things would go on in secret. Parents, those poor people, didn't ask to learn but trusted their children, and didn't want to embarrass them on dates."

By contrast, most elderly men claimed that it was their intention to dance with many and different girls: "I didn't have a specific partner, because I was searching for the right one", a resident said. When it came to prohibited contacts between the bodies of dancers, many elderly men said that the more they liked their date and the words they would exchange with her over dancing, the more they would "press" their bodies to theirs.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article addressed some of the findings from my doctoral research, in particular highlighting the integration of a culture of tango within both urban

and rural Greek communities, a topic for which there are no extant publications within the Greek language. Two teatrological studies (Hatzipantazis & Maraka 1977; Siragakis 2009), an ethnomusicological research (Kitsios 2006), an academic work for tango (Lazana 1997) and an ethnographic research by Cowan (1990) in a northern Greek town, stood as valuable guides to explore the culture of tango in Greece. Greek literature on tango is typically based on music magazines of that era, historical texts on music, and (auto)biographies of famous Greek artists who have engaged with this form of music. Thus, because the presence of the social/historical transformations of tango in Greece is a topic over which there have not been many writings in Greek, its study led to a new combined approach based on the fields of musicology and, in particular, ethnomusicology, history and cultural anthropology. The aim of this ethnographic research as a methodological approach, was to consider tango as a form of cultural expression, thus revealing the function of popular music as a major source for the study of social relations over time.

It may be true that tango, as a music and dance expression, has completed its life cycle in Greece; however, it became apparent through these narratives by the interviewees, that dancing, music and singing were useful factors for understanding the way Greek society in the interwar period perceived love, companionship, social presence and criticism, and overall the ideological management of everyday life. As such, we could say that the ethnographic research on the subject of tango culture presented here is a study of change and motion, since music and dancing were used as tools to represent the evolution of social relationships over time.

Moreover, I would like to consider the contribution of this research regarding the study of old age as a cultural phenomenon. Based on the emotional effects of tango-songs, the elderly reconstructed a past which even if not represented on the basis of social or historical reality, served social needs. From this viewpoint, the tango, as a genre of popular music, acted as a vehicle for enabling the elderly to express their feelings, to feel socially connected and to strengthen their confidence. It is therefore important, in this author's opinion, to note the fact that these narratives do not merely describe or evaluate the music and dance atmosphere of their time. They neither refute nor identify primary sources. They do include, however, experiences, thoughts, emotions, body memories, and also silences. Together, all these constitute the

identity of elderly persons and bestow meaning to their lives, thus offering alternative narratives about the past.

Musical reminiscence, as Thompson (2000) stated, can greatly improve the verbal and physical communication of elderly persons and can therefore be a catalyst of change in the atmosphere inside the care homes or the medical institutions where they reside. Although such recollections cannot treat neurodegenerative diseases such as Dementia and Alzheimer's, music, songs and other audio-visual stimuli can contribute positively to the change of behaviour and psychological status of elderly persons. In his book *'The Voice of the Past: Oral History'*, Thompson (2000) commented that treatment through reminiscence is not a panacea. In other words, significantly strengthening communication and dialogue among a group of elderly persons could cause withdrawal or depression, adding more tension to the already existing negative feelings. As the present research has shown that "contemplation does not fit equally everyone" (Thompson 2000: 233), the idealisation of the past by some residents and their attachment to it, could lead to the expression of negative thoughts. The research concluded that negative emotions (e.g. insecurity, anxiety, anger and sadness) expressed by some of the elderly people, necessitated the help of a professional music therapist and/or psychotherapist.

However, a factor made clear to me through my relationships with the elderly was that their words, on most occasions, do not have much bearing on their actions. This means that even when they get frustrated about their age, their past or present, or the depleted state of their body, what they yearn for is to have their voices, their memories, their concerns and/or their fears heard. As a result, things that are otherwise very simple, such as, for example, a discussion about an experience from their past, may not only assume the form of images and emotions, but it may also have a significant influence on improving their psychological condition.

Yet, in addition, their memories highlight the crucial influences of dance and music in their everyday mode of managing their health and psychosomatic states. Whether or not there were moments from the past the elderly associated with a particular song, or they needed to reconsider, to reassess their past, to redefine their identity or to express their feelings, this study suggests that interactive musical activities which recall memory and can be converted into physical and movement mechanisms, are essential for their physical and

mental wellbeing. For this reason, some easy memory questions about the songs and artists of the interwar era were incorporated into the sessions. This had positive effects on the psychological state of the elderly, demonstrated by their participation in the music and dancing activities, the expressions on their faces and even their applause. The importance of interactive music as well as music's power to soothe, to energise and to arise dormant memories are well documented in the field of music therapy (Aldridge 2000; Ansdell 1995; Carruth 1997). The research presented here suggested that an entertaining music session, combined with other kinds of stimulating cultural activities involving eye-contact, actual touch and communication, could be therapeutic for the elderly.

In conclusion, although the present study was based on a small number of participants, it hopes to offer stimuli for further studies in a systematic effort that popular music is not a unique means but a multiple reality (Brackett 2000; Middleton 1990; Shuker 2001). Therefore, as the memories of elderly persons can help considerably in observation, recording and analysis of popular music, the latter can be used as a tool of 'auxiliary memory' to withdraw significant (autobiographical) memories and emotions.

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