Cretan Music Tradition  
THE ISLAND HAS A LONG AND RICH MUSICAL TRADITION WITH DEEP ROOTS IN ANTIQUITY, STRONGLY INFLUENCED

BY THE BYZANTINE MUSIC AND ENRICHED BY THE MUSICAL CULTURE OF THE WIDER EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN.

During feasts and celebrations, locals and visitors get involved with the special musical culture of Crete.

Cretan music is considered the most vibrant in Greece, because it not only it continues to evolve

and incorporate creative contemporary musical features, but it also manages to express modern reality.

Improvisation is one of the characteristics of Cretan artists. Musicians are not limited to repeating basic melodies,

but enrich their playing with improvisations that accompany dancers, who in turn spontaneously contrive new moves.

Mantinades, small poems, reflect the emotions of Cretans and express sorrow, love and any feeling

that arises from the sensitive Cretan soul. One of the most impressive “scenes”during a typical Cretan feat,

is when two or more improvisers exchange mantinades for hours.

HUGGED MEN IN WEST CRETE SING THE RIZITIKA (REBEL SONGS), SOME OF THE MOST

PRIMITIVE SAMPLES OF MUSICAL AND POETIC TRADITION.

The Cretan Lyre

The basic instrument of Cretan music, the Cretan lyre, first made its appearance in the 17th century,

while playing the lyre became popular in the 18th century. Of course, the initial shape of the instrument was slightly different

from that of the modern lyre, which was designed in 1940 by Manolis Stagakis from Rethymno.

The lyre, which is in the shape of a pear, used to be accompanied by the “boulgari” and later by the “laouto”, the lute,

which is still used today. Both the sound and shape of the Cretan lyre and the traditional songs were improved

after World War II; undoubtedly the lyre players of Rethymno played an important role in this development.

During that period Kostas Mountakis and Thanassis Skordalos, both from Rethymno, contributed to the international recognition

of the traditional Cretan music in the following decades. Other skilled artists like Manolis Lagos, Andreas Rodinos

and Stelios Foustalieris helped to establish the traditional Cretan music.

The Cretans’ close relationship to music and dance can be traced back to the early history and myths of the island.

In one of the most famous myths, for example, the Kourites, the guardians of the infant Zeus, danced while

they beat their shields, in order to cover up the infant’s crying. Homer mentioned the shield of Achilles,

which was adorned with scenes of revelry in Knossos. In Crete music played an important role in every aspect of life

(religious ceremonies, entertainment, birth, marriage, death and war).

Accompanied with the sound of the “lyre”, the lute and occasionally the violin and the guitar, musicians sing “mantinades”,

which are mainly love songs arranged in couplets. The “rizitika”, which are slow songs of narrative character,

are also a popular type of Cretan music. Their main subjects are marriage, death, historical events, heroic characters etc.

The development of dances and the development of music in the course of time were closely connected.

The Cretan dances have their roots in the Minoan times. Contrary to the “syrtos”, which is danced in a large circle,

the “sousta” is danced in couples. It is an erotic and vigorous dance, which is danced almost on the tip of the toes.

Traditional dances, during which men and women wear the superb Cretan costumes, include slow and swift rhythms,

always with dynamic and imposing postures.  The direct connection of Cretan dances with war dances is evident,

particularly if they are danced in a circle by a group of men. Following the rhythm of the lyre, the dancers gradually improve

their technique, while they perform the difficult steps of dances like ‘Pentozalis, ‘Syrtos’ and ‘Pidichtos’. The dancer

who leads the circle, usually a man, is supported by the right hand of the second dancer and is thus able to perform

excellent leaps, the so-called “tsalimia”.