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Anogia, Crete

A burgeoning generation of lyra players are putting a new spin on Cretan folk music and packing in the younger punters. Heidi Fuller-Love reports

Zorba the Greek might have put Crete on the map, but the film's tinkly music score is light years removed from the wild, unbridled folk that pours out over the sweating, writhing crowds in Anogia's village square. As *lyra* maestro and *mantinades* (rhyming couplets) master Giorgos Zervakis reaches the climax of yearning ballad "To Mavro Poukamiso," a group of boot-shod, black-shirted shepherds raise guns and fire several shots over the unfazed heads of the trendy 20-something crowd who've come from the city to shimmy in this mountain village.

Not that the sounds produced here are anything new on the Cretan scene: depending on who you talk to, the three-stringed, pear-shaped lyra has been bowed on Greece's largest island since pre-history, or at least the Byzantine period.

Held upright on the knee and bowed horizontally, the lyra, whose strings are not fingered but grazed with the fingernail, leads a main musical theme embroidered with an infinite number of variations. Generally accompanied by the *laouto* (lute), other instruments that are traditionally played alongside the lyra include a *daoulaki* (barrel drum), a *boulgari* (a smaller lute with a longer neck) and the *askomandoúra* (small bagpipe made of goatskin).

A far cry from the *bouzouki* music of the Greek mainland, Cretan music has a rough and rustic quality to it, which gets you in the guts. Introduced during the Venetian occupation in the Middle Ages, *mantinades* or *kondylies* (rhyming verses) accompany the music. Filled with feisty humour and fighting spirit these 15-syllable couplets – often improvised – talk about love or politics, farming or the fight for freedom.

Seven hundred metres above sea level, the village of Anogia is associated with some of the island's greatest artists. A rallying point for resistance against invaders for centuries, previous village residents include iconic musician Nikos Xylouris, who became a symbol of



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resistance against the military junta of 1967-74, whilst recently deceased Leonidas Klados, considered by many Cretans to be the island's greatest lyra maestro, was born next door in Spili.

Take a walk along the village's one main street and you'll see shops selling bright-coloured, locally-woven textiles surrounding the local *kafenion* where black-shirted shepherds sit clicking their *komboloi* (worry beads) and drinking tar-thick thimbles of *elliniki* Greek coffee.

Not so long ago the *egoismos* – sheep stealing as a proof of valour – was de rigueur in these mountains, whilst some musicians including violin player Kostas Papadakis, were forced to flee the country because of vendettas that were part of everyday life here.



Above: the buildings of Anogia are scattered like white dice across the slopes of Psiloritis, Crete's highest mountain
Below: unorthodox lyra playing from Giorgos Zervakis

In this context it's easier to understand the untamed, vital character of the music. "It is more than just music, it is our identity," says Manolis Kostas. '*Ákoma ke nekros tha kano to kithara*,' sings Zervakis, (Even When I'm Dead I Will Play the Lyra), using the word '*kithara*' the ancient Greek name for his instrument.

Pupil of the great Kostas Mountakis, Zervakis originates from Plomari, a bustling market town on the plains below Anogia. In a video on his website, the (notoriously difficult to interview) musician staunchly defends the need to appeal to a younger generation if the island's music is to survive. A born showman, notorious for downing a bottle of whisky each time he plays, Zervakis' performance becomes increasingly extravagant as the level of the bottle descends. His subsequent unpredictable and edgy renditions of familiar songs have huge appeal to a younger crowd. "Zervakis is like God to us Cretans," one fan confides as a full moon rises above the open-air stage.

Zervakis, buoyed up by the nimble lute playing of long-time partner Kostas Markakis, segues effortlessly into a well-known *mantinades*. As a group of young men clap and chant the refrain of this wild lilting tune, an adolescent, cheered on by his peers, pulls out a pistol and fires a couple of live rounds into the air. Forcing one of his black-shirted fans to kneel, Zervakis pours a shot of whisky down the man's throat, then takes a long swig from the bottle himself.

By now the bottle is a quarter full and the atmosphere is electric. "This is our music; in it we have our identity and if we have it we cannot be vanquished," another fan tells me excitedly. Watching the 20-somethings shimmying to 'Entatiki', an upbeat tune from of Zervakis' latest album, it's hard to see this vibrant music dying out for a long time to come. ●

ONLINE You can buy the music of Giorgos Zervakis at www.cretaphone.gr
DATE Cretan lyra player Stelios Petrakis plays at Songlines Encounters on June 23