

For many years now I have been teaching various modal musical traditions as well as certain of their related instruments in a variety of institutions ranging from rather basic music schools right up to university level courses. In each of these environments I was expected (and reasonably so) to adapt my teaching methods and content to the needs of the specific students who I had before me. In the case of music schools the expectation was to cram repertoire, instrumental technique exercises, theoretical knowledge and the addressing of the individual problems of each individual student all within a 40 to 50 minute lesson, usually once a week. As anyone who has experience teaching in this way can testify, this is in no way sufficient to enable the average student to get any further than simply giving up somewhere down the line. In other words, this is quite simply not how one becomes a musician. In other environments things were either somewhat better or, on occasion, actually rather worse. Interestingly enough, in the world of traditional modal music, at least as it is taught here in Greece, these different aspects of music are not usually addressed individually as separate subjects to be taught in a very specific manner, the way we are accustomed to seeing in the world of Western classical music. In western musical education, instrumental technique, harmony, dictation, rhythmical solfège etc are all very specific subjects taught by instructors who possess diplomas and certificates which verify their ability to actually teach the subject in question. In the world of traditional modal music, this is not the case. All teachers are basically expected to teach practically all aspects of the music without having had specific training in almost any of them, as well as without any tangible guidance in pedagogy in general, let alone in music specifically. This is unfortunately what happens in most cases when what we refer to as “traditional music” is suddenly brought into an institutional educational environment without much thought being given to the question of exactly how it should be taught. I’ve had the opportunity to witness the teaching methods found in many

countries where modal musical traditions have existed and thrived for centuries and even millennia and, in the traditional environment per se, I've noticed certain similarities which are definitely worthy of note. For a start the process of learning music of this type is never seen as simply a gathering and accumulation of relevant information, techniques and dexterities. All of these are of course important but, beyond and above all of that is an initiatory process through which musicians of a younger generation quite literally "inherit" their predecessors through a long process of interaction which extends beyond music into many other aspects of life. In the western world a similar process, usually regarded as a defunct relic of the past, the master-apprentice relationship, once functioned in a similar fashion. In the eastern world, where we find most of the world's traditional modal musical idioms still vibrantly alive, this process goes under various names such as Meşk or Taalim. These terms denote a process of the gradual imparting and assimilation of vast amounts of phrasing material initially through a process of repetition. This phrase material must then be "digested" whereafter it dissipates, acquiring a somewhat more abstract nature before it eventually returns as a source material interacting with creative inspiration as a reborn but simultaneously clearly recognizable entity. In the vast majority of modal musical idioms, every musician is expected to be not only a competent instrumentalist or vocalist, but also a composer and improviser whose ability to conjure the "archetype of the moment" is of paramount importance as a testimony to his/her prowess. In some traditions such as that of Indian Sangeet or "classical" music this is very clearly seen as modes, some of which, although they may have identical tone material but different behavior patterns, might be ascribed to different times of the day or even the year, and may conjure up quite different *rasas* or archetypical emotional or spiritual states. The music itself is largely improvised but in a manner quite different to that which we find in Western improvised music such as jazz. In jazz

improvisation, the scale and its accompanying chordal sequences are of paramount importance. In eastern modal improvisation, as I stated above, the musician must first assimilate and digest a massive amount of phrase material with which he or she will subsequently work in a creative fashion without however thinking their way through the music. Thought is slow and cumbersome for music. In this music, the scale, in the instances where it actually exists, is very much secondary to the *phrase* which contains movement and therefore, for the musician, actually has a life. In this case the musician does not merely *use* the phrase, rather he enters into a dialogue and a relationship with it allowing it to guide *him* to *its* reality and essential truth in that particular moment. In order to be able to attain to the ability to produce music in this way there are actually no clear guidelines or steps to follow. Each musician must receive the individual guidance and initiation of a master who will actually “see” the manifestation of the full-fledged musician hidden deep inside the student, who will then gradually feed and nurture it, and who will eventually draw it out fully realized and in total accord with the student’s nature.

Needless to say this approach to musical education is quite radically different to the more institutionalized western approach to the teaching of music. I would be the last person to negate the value and relevance of institutionalized learning but I would say that, certainly in the case of modal musical traditions (and perhaps not only), this other dimension which I describe as initiation is absolutely essential and cannot be foregone. Without this element, the music dies and there can be no living heritage.

I’ll conclude this talk with a brief story depicting a personal experience of my own which made a deep impression on me and which, I believe, perhaps helps to clarify the difference between instruction and initiation.

In the mid to late 1970s, at a time when I had just embarked on my journey of studying the Cretan Lyra, I was

living in the town of Hania on the western end of the island of Crete. In those days there was a very famous and quite old Lyra player in the district of Apokoronas (directly to the East of Hania) called Michalis Papadakis but who was known by all by the nickname "Plakianos" (a reference to his origin from the village of Plaka). This man was said to have been the foremost Lyra player of the region, but he was also known to be a very simple and quiet man with little or no formal education, who lived alone in a small house in the village of Kalyves. I set off to this village determined to meet him and, hopefully, to be able to hear him play. Upon arriving in Kalyves, I enquired as to his whereabouts and was quickly and courteously escorted to the front porch of his house where he was sitting. I walked up to him and introduced myself to him and explained that I was studying the Lyra and that I had heard many glowing accounts from many people referring to his exceptional playing on the instrument. He offered me coffee and we chatted for a few minutes before he went into his house and came out with a Lyra of his own construction. He carefully tuned it and then did something which at the time seemed to me to be rather strange. He asked me to take my chair to a location approximately 4 meters away from him and sit on it looking in the opposite direction from where he was sitting. The thought crossed my mind that sometimes old musicians in certain traditions, not wanting people to learn their secrets would on occasion resort to somewhat bizarre methods in order to guard their secrets. I didn't give any more thought to the matter and simply sat in my chair looking at nice but not exceptional view whilst simultaneously being captivated and indeed mesmerized by this old master's playing. He played for about half an hour before his Lyra fell silent and he called me to go and sit at the table with him. I expressed my deep appreciation for his kindness in playing for me and I told him how much I had enjoyed his music. He then said to me: " when I told you to go and sit over there and look in the opposite direction, you were probably thinking that it was because I didn't want you to

“steal” my secrets, right?”. I replied that well, yes indeed the thought did actually cross my mind. He then said that this was not the reason for his strange request. The real reason that he wanted me to sit at a small distance and to not look at him was that, because I was a Lyra student, if I had sat next to him and watched him, I would have been observing and thinking about what he was doing with his fingers and with the bow and other such technical matters, and that I wouldn't be focused on the music. What he wanted in that first encounter was for me to really hear the music. After that he graciously offered to show me whatever I wanted. This lesson, simple though it may seem at first glance, was one of the most significant of my entire life and it really did “initiate” me into a quite different understanding of the task of learning music. Ever since then, whenever I would find myself in the presence of any musician who I had not previously encountered, I would invariably listen to them carefully without looking at them in order to quite simply “hear the music” before making any effort to understand or in any way analyze what they might be doing. Very often seemingly simple experiences like this one can have an enormous impact when they occur in the right way and at the exact right moment. True masters know how to work with these moments and can actually use them to great effect.

In all fairness I should point out however that this particular aspect of musical education which I refer to as the “initiatory process” is not unique or exclusive to modal or any other specific type of music. Rather it is an essential component of the art itself without which music would somehow be without a soul. It is therefore of great importance in my view, alongside our continued efforts to improve and render ever more effective institutionalized musical education, to not neglect the enormous importance and necessity of this “other side” of the journey of learning music.

