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Eleftheria Arvanitaki pictured in Athens in 2008

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ELEFThERIA ARVANITAKI

Maria Lord examines the Greek vocalist's remarkable career

One of Greece's most versatile and popular singers, Eleftheria Arvanitaki is also one of the few Greek artists to have much of a profile outside of her native land, performing with a number of famous international musicians including Philip Glass and Cesaria Evora. Her voice has a clarity and ability to subtly bring out the emotion of a song that makes her singing unmistakable. She was born in 1960 in Piraeus into a family from the island of Ikaria in the Dodecanese. Her first break came in 1980 when she joined the *rebetika* group Opisthodomikis Kompania, and began to make her mark during the most heady days of the rebetika revival. She began to guest with other musicians, first of all in 1981 on the album *Ta Barakia* by Vangelis Germanos, and in 1984 made her first solo album, *Eleftheria Arvanitaki*.

In 1985 Opisthodomikis Kompania disbanded and the same year she began what has been an ongoing collaboration with the songwriter and musician Nikos Xydakis. The two songs she performs on his album *Mania*, especially 'Stin Arhi Tou Tragoudiou', are some of the most beautiful she has ever recorded. She followed this up with another solo album, *Kontrabando*, in 1986, and in 1987 was back recording with Xydakis on one of his most popular and best-selling albums *Konda Sti Doxi Mia Stigni*, providing some very classy singing and launching herself into a spate of collaborations with other musicians over the next few years.

Having begun her career by singing rebetika – a gritty urban music with its roots in Asia Minor which emerged from the slums of

Piraeus at the beginning of the 20th century – she was now also a leading light in what was dubbed *neo laiko*, a more experimental, 'arty' form of Greek music that drew on popular traditions from all over the country and Asia Minor.

The early 90s saw her emerge as one of the most sought-after Greek musicians, touring with Dimitra Galani and producing three solo albums. International recognition came with the 1991 album *Meno Ektos*, the first time she worked with the Armenian composer and *oud* player Ara Dinkjian. As with Xydakis, she has worked with Dinkjian a

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number of times since, even performing his 'Dinata,' the most popular song from *Meno Ektos*, at the closing ceremony of the Athens Olympics in 2004.

She reached a new highpoint with the release of *To Korpia Kai Ta Mahairia* in 1994 (released abroad as *The Bodies and the Knives*). This solo album, which also included Dinkjian, became one of her most successful, and they followed up on this collaboration by touring Greece and Cyprus together during 1995.

1998 was the year in which she began to become known to a wider audience, appearing at WOMAD and staging concerts in the Canary Islands, Jerusalem and at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. Her live performances in Greece

that year were released on what is one of her best albums, *Ektos Programmatos/Off The Road*. Attracting the attention of Verve, she was now sufficiently established and well-known for them to release a 'Best Of' album for distribution outside Greece, and she also features on Cesaria Evora's best-selling release *Best of Cesaria Evora*. By now she was regularly performing abroad, especially in Spain where she still has a large following, and appearing at international festivals. But 2004 was to prove an especially big year for her. Aside from singing at the closing ceremony of the Olympics, she also took part in a collaboration with the Philip Glass Ensemble, performing on *Orion* along with musicians such as Ravi Shankar and Wu Man.

As Greece's pre-eminent female vocalist, Eleftheria Arvanitaki goes from strength-to-strength, producing an album with Nikos Xydakis in 2006 (*Grigora i Ora Perase*) that was extremely well-received in Greece, and continuing to work with Dinkjian. In 2008 she released her latest CD, *Mirame* – a bit of departure for the singer – and once again seems to be aiming to find a new international market. This collaboration with Spanish flamenco musicians, notably producer Javier Limón, has her trademark emotional yet controlled singing and great arrangements that draw on a range of Mediterranean influences – a disc sure to please her large base of fans in Spain. ●

REVIEW Latest album *Mirame* is reviewed this issue
ONLINE Hear excerpts from *Mirame* and the Best... albums at www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/060

BEST... ...ALBUMS

Eleftheria Arvanitaki (Lyra, 1984)
This is her first solo album, with a youthful energy and slight rawness to her voice that is very engaging. She continues to perform some of these songs in concerts even now.

To Korpia Kai Ta Mahairia/The Bodies and the Knives (Polydor, 1994)
Considered one of her finest achievements, with great performances of songs that came from a collaboration between composer Ara Dinkjian and lyricists Mihali Gana and Lina Nikolakopoulou.

Ektos Programmatos/Off The Road (Mercury, 1998)
Recorded live in Athens and in Thessalonica, this double CD is hugely enjoyable, with performances of many well-loved traditional and popular Greek songs.

...COMPILATIONS
 Dynata 1986-2007 (Mercury, 2007)
If you can get hold of a copy, this double CD is the best all-round overview of her work, taking in some truly great singing right through her solo career.

The Very Best Of 1989-1998 (Emarcy, 1999)
Still worth a buy (not least because it is easier to get hold of in the UK), this is a classic compilation from some of her best-selling albums. All but five of the tracks are duplicated on the more recent *Dynata* (left) but you also get songs such as 'To Kokino Foustani' and 'Skies Kai Chromata' that are well worth a listen.

Dromoi Paralliloi/Parallel Roads (Mercury, 2005)
This album brings together many of the best tracks Arvanitaki has recorded for other artists, as well as previously unreleased material.



LIKE ELEFThERIA? THEN TRY... DIMITRA GALANI

Live Sto Vox (Heaven, 2007)
Dimitra Galani has performed for and with almost all the major Greek musicians of the last 30 years and is a doyen of *laiko* and *entekhno*. This recording of her live in Athens with another great singer Alkistis Protopsalti is great fun.