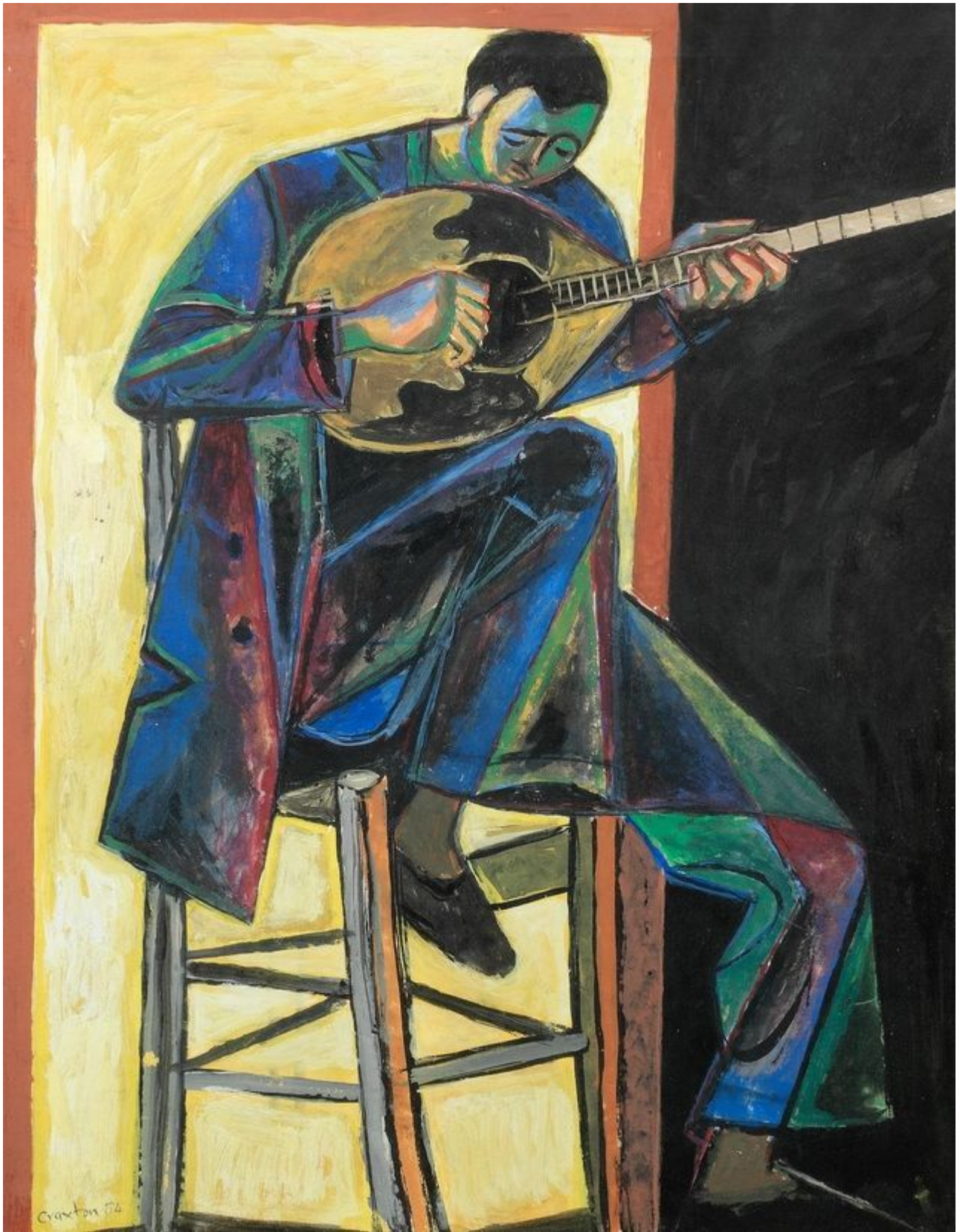


# The Bouzouki Odyssey of Dimitrios Bogris

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (July 2020)



*Musician in Taverna*, John Craxton, 1954

*There is no greater fame for a man than that which he wins with . . . the skill of his hands.*

–Homer, The Odyssey

I was not an unusual child. I did not demonstrate any great musical gifts or interests during my first ten years but, I was always listening to and aware of sounds; the sound of the road, the sound of the house and the sounds of my Greek grandmother, who lived with us and who rose early in the morning to start her domestic round.”

This is what Dimitris Bogris first told me when I asked the Toronto born bouzouki player and composer, how, by the time he was in his early twenties he had become a virtuosic performer on that archetypically modern, long-necked, Greek lute.

As an ethnomusicological “sound traveler” I wanted to better understand how this thirty-year old man, had become a bouzouki master able to hold the attention of and gain the enthusiasm of audiences, not only in Greece, but on a recent world tour. And so, I hauled myself over to Dimitri’s recording studio and over many cups of Greek coffee and pastries, he told me his story.

Dimitri was born in Toronto, August 15, 1987. One side of his family comes from northern Greece, with a memory of an immigration from Asia Minor during the traumatic population exchanges of Greeks and Turks in the early 1920s. That was a time when wars between Greece and Turkey created a situation where a million suddenly impoverished Greeks moved from their ancestral homes in Asia Minor, to Greece proper.

This dramatic and traumatic influx of Greek Orthodox contributors to the then Ottoman Turkish musical world, triggered the creation of a new, distinctively Greek popular art form, heavily influenced by Turkish music and scales, and which gave birth to the modern bouzouki and the pre-WWII blues like, urban music that came to be called Rembetiko. The other

side of Dimitri's family comes from the island of Kos, in the Cyclades.

Dimitri's parents were hard working but due to personal incompatibilities separated when he was four, and so he grew up in his mother's house, visited his father regularly and became close to his maternal grandmother.

He continues, "As I said, I was not unusual and was actually a bit socially awkward. I did not stand out in any way. I was not a very good student at school, average at best, was not interested in or good at sports. I tended to keep to myself and harbor my own thoughts and feelings. I did not have a lot of friends."

One thing that stands out was the fact that there was a sound track peculiar to his house. His grandmother had brought about twenty cassettes of Greek island music with her when she came to Canada. She listened to them from the time she got up at five in the morning, to the time she went to sleep, and these island folk songs became part of Dimitri's musical unconscious.

At the same time, and like most other Canadians of Greek descent, Dimitri went to "Greek school," an intensive after hours and weekend series of activities where children in the Greek community learn to read and write Greek, sing Greek songs and learn Greek dances. One of them was a danced song called "sousta" which he had heard from his grandmother on her cassettes. Then there was the music of the Greek Orthodox church.

"I was indifferent to going to Church. I neither liked or disliked it. I was rarely at ease there as it was always too hot, and wearing a suit at a such a young age did not feel good. I was not physically comfortable sitting through the services, but I now realize I did absorb much of the ancient Byzantine church music which by the time I was a young

teenager and bouzouki player, I was finally able to appreciate. I feel that there is some sort of musical connection between the two repertoires.”

In 1999, for his eleventh birthday, Dimitri’s father took him to Greece for the first time. He stayed there about a month. The family was based in Athens and the radio was always on in the apartment. They were playing old Rembetiko and the latest Laika, bouzouki dominated popular songs. It got so that when the radio was off, Dimitri would marvel at the silence and turn it on again.

“Athens was incredible, and our apartment was near what was then the edge of the city. There were fields nearby with fig trees that my grandfather and I visited. We picked the fruits, right off the tree and ate them then and there. Then there was the fish market. At first, I did not want to go, but the sounds, the colours, the noise and the people held me spellbound and after that we would go home and barbecue in the backyard. The food was incredible. Then my father took me on a road trip. We went north from Athens, north west to Ioannina and then to the east of the country, to Meteora in Macedonia. We listened to all and every local radio station that we could. I was in a state of complete absorption and as I spoke Greek I fit right in. Greece was a foreign county to me, but I was not treated as a foreigner.”

“I came back to Toronto and a couple of weeks later, just before the start of the school year. I asked my father to buy me a bouzouki and find me a teacher. We bought my first instrument and I began to work with my teacher Anastassios Issaakidis.”

From that moment on Dimitri’s life changed. He worked fastidiously with his teacher. He would often play his exercises for three to four hours a day. Some days, just before going to school he would open the case, pluck the strings, just to make sure it and all was OK and then go to

classes. The next summer he was back in Greece, absorbing music here, there and everywhere and then back to Toronto to work with his teacher.

One would imagine that eventually his talent and remarkable dedication to his instrument and craft would have made him the talk of the Greek Canadian community, but that is not what happened. Dimitri became a bouzouki hermit; the musical equivalent of those medieval Greek monks who, centuries ago, turned their back on the world to pray and chant hymns in the caves of Mount Athos.

“Only once did I play in public as a young teenager. I had a Jamaican Canadian music teacher who heard that I played, and he encouraged me to play for the school. I did so. I was very scared. I had stage fright. It passed. People were amazed and then voluntarily, I returned to my bouzouki obscurity. I was in love with the sound of the instrument, wanted to master it and did not yet dream of public acclaim.”

By the time Dimitri was 15 his father became concerned. He was at best an average student, not very social, introverted and not athletic. Although his father recognized that he was a good musician and bouzouki player he threatened to stop paying for lessons, if Dimitri did not get his academic house in order. He carried out his threat and the money for lessons stopped. In response, Dimitri stopped playing as well. Towards the end of that two-year period he began coming out of his shell socially and spent much of his spare time with his newly found girlfriend. When they broke up, he went back to his instrument.

When he began his bouzouki lessons, his father had bought him a two CD set of the greatest bouzouki pieces and players of the 20th century. Now he set out to master every one of these pieces, note for note. At the same time, he began to open himself up to the dromoi, the Greek cousin of the Turkish modes of Ottoman classical music, and which are the

basis of the free form improv called Taksim, common to much Turkish, Arabic and Greek music.

By the time he finished high school, and in between odd jobs, it became known to a small circle of friends that Dimitri was an above average player of the bouzouki. There are still bands among the Greek community of Toronto who sing the popular Greek songs of the last eighty years for weddings, and a group of older musicians heard Dimitri. They asked him to join their wedding band. Within a short period of time, Dimitri had learnt this repertoire and was performing at paid gigs, regularly.

“I had become a bit more sociable by this time and learnt the repertoire and how to get along with musicians who were usually fifteen or even twenty years older than me. I also learnt how to roll out a free form Taksim in front of an audience. I must confess that the difference between me and some, but not all, of the wedding musicians was that I wanted each note and arrangement to be perfect. I wanted our performances to compare with anything that could come out of Greece. And by that time, I began to see the connection between the dromoi, the bouzouki and the modes of Greek church music which I have thankfully made room for in my musical imagination.”

For the next seven years Dimitri played weddings. Occasionally, he would work in the food and hospitality business to increase his income, but he lamented that there is nothing that he likes to do better than to play bouzouki.

Guitar virtuoso and recording artist Pavlo Simitkidis, who is 15 years older than Dimitri, had been following his musical development, and like the character Mentor in the Odyssey, approached Dimitri asking him to join his band, and then some time after, invited him to tour the world with his ensemble.

“I remember the day he called me. I was in the car, driving, I was so excited that I could not think. They sent me a pile of challenging material and told me ‘learn it’ and I did.”

In July of 2015, Pavlo’s ensemble with Dimitri on bouzouki, gave a concert that has been publicised by National Public Radio (NPR), of Mediterranean instrumental music at the mountain theatre in Kastoria, a lake side city in northern Greece, the home town of Pavlo’s father, and from where he had immigrated to Canada sixty years ago.

The line up included not only musicians but dancer Vasilis Gkouletsas, whose traditional interpretation of the Greek, free form, solo, male Zembekiko dance (which Dimitri had first learnt at Greek school!) he made look like an inspired mix of Sufi whirling and the movements of a mountain dwelling eagle or hawk, spinning and darting across the stage.

The repertoire for the evening included melodies taken from many of Pavlo’s commercially released CDs which include Greek, Spanish, and French songs, as well as other forms of Mediterranean instrumental music, distantly echoing the pre-WWII fusions of the French Gypsy jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt, mixed with more recent influences from modern Flamenco giants, like Paco De Lucia and the Gypsy Kings.

The amphitheatre was full, the audience was with them and they all played well. You can get a taste of the concert at this YouTube link and, you can witness the dexterity of Dimitri on the piece called Café Kastoria posted by a fan:

Dimitri tells me, “I did not expect to be paid to travel the world—Canada, the States, Europe and the Far East. I never expected to visit Korea or Japan, but I have done all those things and look forward to doing them some more. Pavlo is a man of great personal and artistic integrity. I am



privileged to work with him, but I do have other aspirations as I have been writing my own melodies these days.”

We finish our last coffee in Dimitri’s studio. He is now playing me recorded selections from his own compositions. Some are complete and some incomplete. They are largely Greek and Mediterranean inspired. I can hear the echoes of modern Greek composers such as Hadjidakis, who, although classically trained, was inspired by the bouzouki and the music that came to be called Rembetiko in pre-WII Athens.

Dimitri tells me, “I do not think of myself only as a Greek musician. I am a musician who happens to be of Greek descent and who has worked within some Greek repertoires. I am looking for my own sound. I sometimes can hear it and then . . . it disappears. I am not there yet, but I will get there someday.”

I told Dimitri that I hear a bit of Hadjidakis sounding melodies in his music and he answered me, “You know, I was listening to a classical station the other day. I was mesmerized by the right hand and left-hand interplay. It literally blew me away. I have just bought a keyboard and I may begin to take this kind of music more seriously.”

In the meantime, Dimitri teaches a growing number of students in the GTA bouzouki. He plays with Pavlo’s band, works on his own material and is open to the music of his land of birth.

Dimitri’s musical journey has just begun. When the muses called him to the bouzouki at the tender age of 12, little did he know that this instrument, what the great Rembetiko composer, player and singer, Vamvakaris once called, “this sacred thing,” would bring him back to Greece and then home again. No doubt we will hear more from him in the years ahead.

After I left his studio, I looked out upon the grey,

damp and snow-covered streets of Toronto, my mind travelled back to a moment on a beach I remember visiting many years ago, on the Gulf of Corinth, looking out at the wine dark sea. I recalled a line from Homer's *Odyssey* that captures the spirit of Dimitri's calling: "*Each man delights in the work that suits him best.*"

More about Dimitri's music [here](#).

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Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

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