

THE GREEK MUSIC PROJECT and FIREFLIGHT

The Greek Music Project was created to bring to a wider audience the music of those Greek composers who, ever since their nation freed itself from the Ottomans, have built upon and enriched the traditions of Western music.

About Fireflight



Fireflight's mission is to bring the listening public music nearly no one knows that almost anyone can enjoy. We search out the gifted composers whose faces never made it onto plaster busts, the musicians who should be living legends but somehow aren't. We offer serious music that has never won fame, despite its evident power to astonish, rouse, and delight.

*Fireflight: Great music that missed the bandwagon,
performed with the passion it deserves.*

PIANIST MARIA CHOBAN

by David Maclaine

The first time I met Maria Choban, we talked for three hours. It was like being swept up in a whirlwind, fueled by intelligence, strong personal convictions and an intense passion for what she did. When I got the chance to hear her play I discovered a musician blessed with everything a pianist could wish: brilliant technique, temperament to burn, a gift for expression coupled with a keen understanding of the music, and an infectious enthusiasm for public performance. Throw in a great stage presence and a generous helping of sex appeal and it was hard to see how she could go wrong.

I knew she had started picking out tunes by ear on a toy piano when she was three years old, started piano lessons when she was six, and had from then followed the usual path from prodigy to professional: a prestigious teacher, triumph in competitions, a highly-praised solo debut with an esteemed orchestra. There was a little gap in the biography but I didn't think about that. What I saw was a gifted musician who had put together a trio with a great name—St. Elvis—with two other musicians as attractive and talented as she was. They made great music together. With the right breaks Maria and the trio could easily go all they way.

They didn't. After the Trio fell apart in storms of mutual recrimination I began to hear stories that explained why this gifted pianist hadn't become a star in her twenties, about the pressures and rebellion that made her run away from her career. As I watched her second crash after St. Elvis died I saw how family dynamics, her self-destructive attractions to the wrong sort of men, and the vagaries of brain chemistry can combine to flatten a major talent.

You can't imagine what it was like unless you can blend together in your head the movies "Shine," "The Piano Teacher" and "My Big Fat Greek Wedding."

But at last the day came when I saw Maria take charge of her life again. With the help of support groups and friends she began to figure out why her career had gone off the rails. She said goodbye to a bad marriage and learned to vent her manic energy in long bike rides. She's even stopped telling her Workaholics Anonymous sponsor she's too busy to meet. I won't say Maria has entirely conquered her demons, but at least they're no longer dog-piled on top of her and pinning her down. She's on her feet now, and when the demons jump out at her she's ready to kick their butts. Her passion, her relentless energy, and her formidable intelligence have finally been unleashed at full force to flood into her music. Greek Rapture marks her triumphant comeback. My bet is that this time she's back to stay.



GREEK RAPTURE

Maria Choban

pianist



Program

- 1-5 Preludes for Piano (1939) by Manolis Kalomiris [13:59]
- 1 Prelude no. 1 "for Krino" *Molto Agitato ed appassionato* [2:29]
- 2 Prelude no. 2 "to Aleko Georyiadi" *Andantino piacevole* [2:59]
- 3 Prelude no. 3 "for Krino" *Appassionato con moto* [2:41]
- 4 Prelude no. 4 "for Lila Lalouni" *Quasi recitativo and Andantino quasi Allegretto* [2:11]
- 5 Prelude no. 5 "for Lila Lalouni" *Assai vivo e vigoroso* (gallant) [3:35]

- 6-12 Corsair Dances: Suite for Piano (1950) by Yannis A. Papaioannou [14:45]
- 6 I *Allegro con fuoco* [1:40]
- 7 II *Intermezzo, Poco piu lento* [0:41]
- 8 III *Allegro passionato* [3:19]
- 9 IV *Molto Lento, Allegro risoluto* [1:52]
- 10 V *Pesante* [3:40]
- 11 VI *Adagio, Andante con moto* [1:52]
- 12 VII *Allegro non troppo* [1:40]

- 13-22 For a Little White Seashell: Preludes and Dances for the Piano, op.1 (1945-47) by Manos Hadjidakis [18:43]
- 13, 14 I March, *Syrtos* [2:45, 1:28]
- 15, 16 II Conversation with Sergei Prokofiev, *Tsamikos* [1:56, 1:18]
- 17, 18 III Mandinada, *Ballos* [1:46, 0:58]
- 19, 20 IV Nocturne, *Calamatianos* [2:04, 1:35]
- 21, 22 V Pastorale, *Grand Sousta* [2:52, 1:51]

- 23 Chant A L Nuit, op. 21 (Second Rhapsody) (1921) by Manolis Kalomiris [10:57]

Total time: 58:36

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GREEK RAPTURE

Maria Choban
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THE BATTLE FOR GREEK MUSIC

by Maria Choban

Before I could talk I remember hearing Greek records on the phonograph. When I was five I began to study classical piano. By the time I was ten my teacher had introduced me to Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Chopin and Bartok. She hoped to find Greek music in a similar vein, but there was next to nothing available. All she could do was ask my mother to find some Greek folk tunes I could learn.

As a classically trained musician born in America to Greek parents I was curious to find out what Greeks had been able to accomplish with western musical traditions. When I was 24 I worked in a large music store. I looked for Greek music; I found almost nothing. I tried writing Greek libraries, museums, schools, conservatories; I sent something like 200 letters and got three replies—all negative. I visited the Library of Congress, but exhausted its resources in two visits. There was clearly only one way to see my quest through. I had to visit Greece.

In 1996 I finally did. I found a country where I was at home immediately, whose spirit and energy and vitality I adored. In pursuit of my quest I tracked down people who could tell me what I wanted to know. Some were helpful. I discovered that there were many Greeks eager to preserve their country's heritage and make it better known. They guided me to some wonderful

music. On the other hand, there was an important archive of music full of unsorted scores, some lying on the floor among the cockroaches with their brittle corners breaking off, those notes lost forever.

Since they won their freedom from the Ottomans, Greek composers have produced more than their share of musical masterpieces. Kalomiris is far less famous than Sibelius, but there are very few people in a position to say which is really the greater composer. I came away from Greece determined to change that. There is a danger that much of the heritage of modern Greek music will be lost before anyone gets a chance to discover how good it is. To prevent that from happening, more people need to care. I have determined to do my part by giving Western audiences the chance to discover the passion and power of Greek music. That's why I have embarked upon The Greek Music Project, to bring to a wider audience the music of those Greek composers who have built upon and enriched the traditions of Western music.

I am haunted by the memory of my great-uncle, Kostas Papadopoulos. He was a musician, a composer whose work, never published, existed only in his handwritten originals. After he died, the maid who inherited his apartment threw away his manuscripts, and uncle Kosta's life's work was carted off with the trash. Greek music needs strong supporters if it is to be saved from the dustbin. This recording is the first blow in my battle to raise that support.

MANOLIS KALOMIRIS

1883–1962

Kalomiris is the commanding father figure of the art music of post-Ottoman Greece, and his tumultuous life was closely tied to the triumphs and tragedies of his nation as it struggled toward its modern form. During the wars of his youth and young adulthood, Kalomiris was drawn into the internal fights to decide what sort of Greece would emerge. He sided with champions of the common, demotic speech over the cultivated dialect of the educated classes. Trained in classical technique in a Vienna conservatory he returned home to fight fiercely for the idea that the new Greek music should look not to ancient or Byzantine precedents but to the sort of folk tunes he had learned at his grandmother's knee. Both works on this recording come from times when the composer and his nation were riding high, with unsuspected disaster just ahead. The *Chant a la Nuit* comes from the heady year of 1921 in which the dreams of a Greater Greece seemed close to attainment. The following year those hopes were shattered when Smyrna, the city of his birth, was burned to the ground during the recapture by the Turks. The *Preludes for Piano* were written in 1939, just two years before the horrors of German occupation would descend upon Greece. The first and third movements are “for Krino” his wife, the second “To Aleko Georyiadi” a musician and family friend, the fourth and fifth “for Lila Lalouni” a talented pianist who was the granddaughter of one of Kalomiris' earliest piano teachers.

YIANNIS PAPAIOANNOU

1910–1989

If Kalomiris was absorbed by the struggles to forge a nation and to find a national character for its music, Yiannis Papaioannou's battle was to ensure that the new Greece did not drift into provincial isolation, but would instead remain in creative contact with the main streams of modern European music. Born in Kavala, Papaioannou was trained at the Greek Conservatory, but regarded himself as essentially self-taught, and his style moved from phase to phase as he absorbed approaches from the larger world. He leaned toward Impressionism just a few years after Debussy and was incorporating folklore not long after Bartok, but was also ready to zig back to explore Byzantine sounds. A Unesco fellowship in 1949 allowed him to sample the new developments in Europe, and work with Honegger in Paris capped off his absorption of the latest compositional techniques. His first foray into serial methods produced his prize-winning *Symphony No. 3*, and after a decade of mining the 12-tone system he began the transition to an utterly distinctive personal style. During his long and successful career as a teacher he was an advocate of learning from exercises based on real music and was the first to teach Greek students the modern techniques of atonality and serialism. His *Corsair Dances*, a *Suite for Piano* that captures all the ferocity of its piratical subject, was written in 1950, a year when he focused on the piano and was pushing his tonal idiom to its farthest limits.

MANOS HADJIDAKIS

1925–1994

While Papaioannou was making sure the Greeks knew what the West had to offer, it was Hadjidakis who brought the Greek voice to a mass Western audience. Whether or not they remember his name there are millions of Americans who will instantly recognize his music— or at least his most famous theme— from the Oscar-winning score to “Never on Sunday” Born in Xanthi, Hadjidakis formal studies were interrupted by World War II, so he remained almost entirely self-taught. He created a stir in 1949 with his enthusiastic lecture on *rebetiko*, a popular form considered low class; unlike his compatriots who remained obsessed by the divide between the educated and peasant, between high culture and low, Hadjidakis made no distinction between serious and light. George Leotsakos notes that he suffered “a psychological inhibition that made sustained effort impossible; hence he avoided large-scale musical forms entailing development.” He chose to compose for the theater and film precisely because the deadline demands of his collaborators would force him to overcome his aversion to completion. The title of the set of *Preludes and Dances*, “For a Little White Seashell” came about because of his youthful procrastination; the story goes that he was pressed for the title of the piece he was supposed to have finished—he had instead taken a trip to the beach—and snatched the name from a nearby souvenir of the trip. “*Syrtos*,” “*Tsamikos*,” etc, are Greek dances.