

CARMELO SICILIANO

THE THEORY OF REBETIKO

From the Makams of Asia Minor to the Dromi of Piraeus



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www.carmelositiliano.it
info@carmelositiliano.it

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Contents

Preface	13
I INTRODUCTION	17
1 The Greek Modal System	19
1.1 Microtones and Interval Measurement	19
1.2 Determining the Pitches	19
1.2.1 The Pythagorean Scale	19
1.2.2 The Hard Diatonic Scale	20
1.2.3 The Natural Scale	21
1.2.4 The Soft Diatonic Scale	22
1.3 The Commas	23
1.4 The Accidentals	24
1.5 Musical, Textual, and Modal Notation	25
1.6 Musical Variations	26
2 The Elements	29
2.1 Numbering the Degrees	29
2.2 Naming the Degrees	29
2.3 Melodic Attraction	30
2.4 Classification of the Elements	31
2.5 Names of the Elements	31
2.6 Hard Diatonic Elements	32
2.6.1 <i>Nichavent & bouselik</i>	33
2.6.2 <i>Kiourdi</i>	34
2.6.3 <i>Tsargkiach</i>	34
2.7 Soft Diatonic Elements, and Their Derivatives	35
2.7.1 <i>Rast</i>	35
2.7.2 <i>Sazkiar</i>	36
2.7.3 <i>Petzgkiach</i>	37
2.7.4 <i>Dougkiach & ousak</i>	38
2.7.5 <i>Saba</i>	39
2.7.6 <i>Segkiach</i>	39
2.7.7 <i>Moustear</i>	40
2.8 Chromatic and Reentrant Elements, and Their Derivatives	41
2.8.1 <i>Chitzaz</i>	41
2.8.2 <i>Pireotiko</i>	42

2.8.3	<i>Nikriz</i>	43
2.8.4	<i>Chisar</i>	44
2.8.5	<i>Choumagioun</i>	44
3	The Modes	45
3.1	The Modes of <i>Rebetiko</i>	45
3.1.1	Functional Degrees and Their Numbering	45
3.1.2	Structure, Element Positions, and Forms	47
3.1.3	Melodic Behavior	48
3.2	Special Phenomena	49
3.2.1	Substitution	49
3.2.2	Interaction	49
3.2.3	Hybridization	49
3.3	Mode Names	50
3.4	Mode Classification	51
3.4.1	<i>Bouselik</i> Group	51
3.4.2	<i>Chitzaz</i> Group	52
3.4.3	<i>Dougkiach</i> Group	53
3.4.4	<i>Kiourdi</i> Group	54
3.4.5	<i>Nikriz</i> Group	55
3.4.6	<i>Rast</i> Group	55
3.4.7	<i>Segkiach</i> Group	56
3.4.8	<i>Tsargkiach</i> Group	57
3.5	From Modes to <i>Dromi</i>	57
3.6	From <i>Dromi</i> to Scales	59
II	MODES AND DROMI	61
4	<i>Araban</i>	63
4.1	Examples	64
4.1.1	<i>Apefasisa pouli mou</i>	64
4.1.2	<i>Apsilies</i>	64
4.1.3	<i>Pasalimaniotissa</i>	65
4.1.4	<i>Proxenia ston Giorgo</i>	66
5	<i>Begiati</i>	67
5.1	Examples	68
5.1.1	<i>Ta dio sou cheria pirane</i> (instrumental)	68
6	<i>Bestenigkiar</i>	69
6.1	Examples	69
6.1.1	<i>Aponi Tourkala</i>	69
7	<i>Bouselik & Chisar Bouselik</i>	71
7.1	Examples	72
7.1.1	<i>O chasapis</i>	72
7.1.2	<i>O epaggelmatias</i> (verse)	73

7.1.3	<i>O Markos ipourgos</i>	74
7.1.4	<i>Otan me vlepis ke perno</i>	74
7.1.5	<i>Ta ble parathira sou</i>	75
8	<i>Chitzaz</i>	76
8.1	Examples	77
8.1.1	<i>Argiles</i> (verse)	77
8.1.2	<i>Baglamades</i> (coda)	78
8.1.3	<i>Ego ime i bolsevika</i>	78
8.1.4	<i>Feretztes</i>	79
8.1.5	<i>Ferte preza na prezaro</i>	80
8.1.6	<i>Gia na xeris</i> (verse)	81
8.1.7	<i>I pentamorfi</i>	82
8.1.8	<i>Manolis o chasiklis</i>	83
8.1.9	<i>Mastouria</i> (instrumental)	84
8.1.10	<i>Mes ston teke tis Marigos</i>	84
8.1.11	<i>Mia Smirnia stin Kokkinia</i> (instrumental)	84
8.1.12	<i>O prezakias</i>	85
8.1.13	<i>Pali mou kanis ton vari</i> (verse)	85
8.1.14	<i>Thelo apopse na glentiso</i> (verse)	86
8.1.15	<i>Ximeroni ke vradiazi</i>	87
9	<i>Chitzazkiar</i>	89
9.1	Examples	89
9.1.1	<i>I Voliotissa</i> (instrumental)	89
9.1.2	<i>Liono mistika</i> (instrumental)	90
9.1.3	<i>O charmanis</i> (verse)	90
9.1.4	<i>O katadikos</i>	90
9.1.5	<i>O Markos o Sirianos</i> (instrumental)	91
9.1.6	<i>Paraponiariko</i> (verse)	91
9.1.7	<i>Tatavliani tsachpina</i> (verse)	92
9.1.8	<i>Thalassino meraki</i> (instrumental)	93
10	<i>Choumagioun</i>	94
10.1	Examples	94
10.1.1	<i>Ipa na sviso ta palia</i>	94
10.1.2	<i>Mortissa Smirnia</i>	95
11	<i>Choumagioun Chitzaz</i>	97
11.1	Examples	97
11.1.1	<i>Girno san nichterida</i> (instrumental)	97
11.1.2	<i>Mou ipan na mi s' agapo</i> (verse)	98
12	<i>Chouseini & Kiotzek</i>	99
12.1	Examples	100
12.1.1	<i>Giati na kathese na les</i> (verse)	100
12.1.2	<i>Kato 'ki sti Drapetsona</i>	101
12.1.3	<i>Me to palio sakkaki</i>	101

12.1.4	<i>Pame gia to praso</i>	102
12.1.5	<i>Patrinia</i> (verse)	103
12.1.6	<i>Ta dio sou cheria pirane</i> (verse)	104
12.1.7	<i>Tetia zoi me vasana</i> (verse)	104
12.1.8	<i>To pechnidi tou Amerikanou</i>	105
13	<i>Chouzam</i>	106
13.1	Examples	106
13.1.1	<i>Alana Pireotissa</i>	106
13.1.2	<i>Deroisena</i>	107
13.1.3	<i>Gelasmenos</i>	108
13.1.4	<i>Karantouzeni</i>	108
13.1.5	<i>Panourga</i>	109
13.1.6	<i>San ise magkas ke dais</i>	110
13.1.7	<i>Ta karavotsakismata</i> (verse)	111
14	<i>Doukiach</i>	112
14.1	Examples	113
14.1.1	<i>Aeroplano tha paro</i> (instrumental)	113
14.1.2	<i>Den ton thelo mana mou</i>	113
14.1.3	<i>Giati na kathese na les</i> (instrumental)	113
14.1.4	<i>Loula mou Athinoula mou</i>	113
14.1.5	<i>O ergatis</i> (instrumental, coda)	114
14.1.6	<i>O Pikinos</i> (verse)	115
14.1.7	<i>Tetia zoi me vasana</i> (instrumental)	115
14.1.8	<i>To flitzani tou Gianni</i>	116
15	<i>Evits</i>	117
15.1	Examples	118
15.1.1	<i>Genti Koule</i> (verse)	118
15.1.2	<i>Kathe vradaki me gelas</i>	119
15.1.3	<i>Min kles manoula mou</i>	119
16	<i>Gkerdanie</i>	121
16.1	Examples	122
16.1.1	<i>Im' orfanos</i> (verse)	122
16.1.2	<i>O ergatis</i> (verse)	122
17	<i>Kartsigiar</i>	124
17.1	Examples	125
17.1.1	<i>Aeroplano tha paro</i> (verse)	125
17.1.2	<i>Kontrabatzides</i>	125
17.1.3	<i>O Pikinos</i> (instrumental)	126
17.1.4	<i>Rixe tsiggana ta chartia</i> (instrumental)	126
17.1.5	<i>Sto Votaniko</i> (verse)	126
17.1.6	<i>To baglamadaki papse</i>	127
18	<i>Kiourdi</i>	128

18.1	Examples	129
18.1.1	<i>Apo kato ap' tis domates</i>	129
18.1.2	<i>Argile mou giati svinis</i> (verse)	129
18.1.3	<i>Baglamades</i> (instrumental, verse)	130
18.1.4	<i>De me toubaris</i>	131
18.1.5	<i>Dodeka chrono koritsi</i>	132
18.1.6	<i>I dio seretes</i>	132
18.1.7	<i>Mas kinigoun ton argile</i>	133
18.1.8	<i>O xemialismenos</i> (instrumental)	134
18.1.9	<i>Psila ti chtizis ti folia</i>	134
18.1.10	<i>Se mia mikroula</i> (verse)	134
18.1.11	<i>Thelo na pinis na methas</i> (verse)	135
18.1.12	<i>Tora pou 'chis paradakia</i>	136
19	<i>Machour & Zavil</i>	137
19.1	Examples	138
19.1.1	<i>Agiothodoritissa</i>	138
19.1.2	<i>Diamanto alaniara</i>	139
19.1.3	<i>Elliniki apolafsis</i>	140
19.1.4	<i>Giovan Tsaous</i>	141
19.1.5	<i>Ime pedaki malama</i>	142
19.1.6	<i>Mas pirane chabari</i> (instrumental)	142
19.1.7	<i>Mou fenete</i> (verse)	143
19.1.8	<i>O lathreboras</i> (verse)	143
19.1.9	<i>Osi echoune polla lefta</i>	144
19.1.10	<i>Ta chanoumakia</i> (verse)	145
20	<i>Mouchagier</i>	146
20.1	Examples	147
20.1.1	<i>Adinatisa o kaimenos</i>	147
20.1.2	<i>Im' orfanos</i> (instrumental)	148
20.1.3	<i>Mana me macherosane</i>	148
20.1.4	<i>Patrinia</i> (instrumental)	148
20.1.5	<i>Smirnia kamomatou</i>	148
20.1.6	<i>To gliko fili</i>	149
21	<i>Mouchagier Chitzaz</i>	151
21.1	Examples	151
21.1.1	<i>Gia na xeris</i> (instrumental)	151
21.1.2	<i>I Maritsa i Smirnia</i> (verse)	152
21.1.3	<i>Matia mou</i>	152
21.1.4	<i>Mia Smirnia stin Kokkinia</i> (verse)	153
21.1.5	<i>Thelo apopse na glentiso</i> (instrumental)	154
21.1.6	<i>Trava spagko</i> (instrumental)	154
22	<i>Mouchagier Kiourdi</i>	155
22.1	Examples	156

22.1.1	<i>Argile mou giati svinis</i> (instrumental)	156
22.1.2	<i>Kakourga pethera</i>	156
22.1.3	<i>O xemialismenos</i> (verse)	157
22.1.4	<i>Pente Ellines ston Adi</i>	157
22.1.5	<i>Se mia mikroula</i> (instrumental)	158
22.1.6	<i>Sevdalou</i>	158
22.1.7	<i>Teketzis</i>	159
22.1.8	<i>Thelo na pinis na methas</i> (instrumental)	159
23	<i>Moustear</i>	160
23.1	Examples	160
24	<i>Neveser</i>	161
24.1	Examples	162
24.1.1	<i>Adiase mou ti gonia</i> (instrumental, verse)	162
24.1.2	<i>Gkarsona</i> (instrumental)	163
24.1.3	<i>I exi entoles</i>	163
24.1.4	<i>Mi mou les pos de me thelis</i>	164
24.1.5	<i>Nea meraklou</i>	165
24.1.6	<i>Rixe tsiggana ta chartia</i> (verse)	165
25	<i>Nichavent</i>	167
25.1	Examples	168
25.1.1	<i>Adiase mou ti gonia</i> (coda)	168
25.1.2	<i>Chtes to vradi sto skotadi</i>	168
25.1.3	<i>Gkarsona</i> (verse)	168
25.1.4	<i>M' echis magemeno</i>	169
25.1.5	<i>Mavra matia mavra fridia</i>	170
25.1.6	<i>O Markos mathitis</i> (verse)	171
25.1.7	<i>O ponos tou prezakia</i> (verse)	171
25.1.8	<i>Oli i rebetes tou dounia</i> (verse)	172
25.1.9	<i>Se xechasa de s' agapo</i>	173
25.1.10	<i>Tha 'rtho na se xipniso</i>	173
26	<i>Nikriz</i>	175
26.1	Examples	176
26.1.1	<i>Dervisis ke Rita</i>	176
26.1.2	<i>Gkarsona</i> (instrumental)	176
26.1.3	<i>I mikri ap' to Pasalimani</i>	176
26.1.4	<i>Nei chasiklides</i>	177
26.1.5	<i>O Markos politechnitis</i>	178
26.1.6	<i>O thermastis</i>	179
26.1.7	<i>Pia de me gelas</i>	179
27	<i>Ousak</i>	181
27.1	Examples	182
27.1.1	<i>Aeroplano tha paro</i> (verse)	182
27.1.2	<i>Alaniara meraklou</i>	183

27.1.3	<i>Eleni Elenara mou</i>	184
27.1.4	<i>Etsi Marika dechome</i>	184
27.1.5	<i>I Armenitsa</i>	185
27.1.6	<i>O milonas</i>	186
27.1.7	<i>Stis nichtas to skotadi</i>	187
27.1.8	<i>Vironiotissa</i>	187
28	<i>Ouzal</i>	189
28.1	Examples	190
28.1.1	<i>De s' agapo de s' agapo</i>	190
28.1.2	<i>Girno san nichterida</i> (verse)	190
28.1.3	<i>I foni tou argile</i>	191
28.1.4	<i>I Maritsa i Smirnia</i> (instrumental)	192
28.1.5	<i>Trava spagko</i> (verse)	192
29	<i>Petzgkiach</i>	195
29.1	Examples	195
29.1.1	<i>I kamomatou</i> (coda)	196
30	<i>Pireotiko</i>	197
30.1	Examples	197
30.1.1	<i>Elliniki apolafsis</i> (coda)	197
30.1.2	<i>I Voliotissa</i> (verse)	198
30.1.3	<i>Mes stou Manthou ton teke</i>	199
30.1.4	<i>O xemagkas</i>	199
31	<i>Rast</i>	201
31.1	Examples	202
31.1.1	<i>Chariklaki</i> (verse)	202
31.1.2	<i>Echi i Ellada omorfies</i>	203
31.1.3	<i>Gkamilieriko</i>	204
31.1.4	<i>Ise fonias</i>	204
31.1.5	<i>Marika chasiklou</i>	205
31.1.6	<i>Mes stou Vavoula ti gouvva</i>	206
31.1.7	<i>O lathreboras</i> (instrumental)	206
31.1.8	<i>Tris orfanes</i>	207
31.1.9	<i>Zebekano spaniolo</i>	207
32	<i>Rechavi</i>	209
32.1	Examples	210
32.1.1	<i>Chariklaki</i> (instrumental, coda)	210
32.1.2	<i>I kamomatou</i> (instrumental, verse)	210
32.1.3	<i>O agimnastos</i> (instrumental)	212
33	<i>Saba</i>	213
33.1	Examples	214
33.1.1	<i>Alithini agapi</i>	214
33.1.2	<i>I filakes tou Oropou</i>	214

33.1.3	<i>O xenitemenos</i>	215
33.1.4	<i>Papatzis</i>	216
34	<i>Sazkiar</i>	217
34.1	Examples	217
34.1.1	<i>Magkes karavotsakismeni</i>	217
34.1.2	<i>Mou fenete</i> (instrumental)	218
34.1.3	<i>O agimnastos</i> (verse)	218
34.1.4	<i>O Markos kani sarmako</i>	219
34.1.5	<i>O Markos mathitis</i> (instrumental)	220
34.1.6	<i>O mourmouris</i>	220
34.1.7	<i>O ponos tou prezakia</i> (instrumental)	220
34.1.8	<i>Oli i rebetes tou dounia</i> (instrumental)	220
34.1.9	<i>Sto Faliro pou plenese</i>	221
34.1.10	<i>Ta karavotsakismata</i>	221
35	<i>Sechnaz</i>	223
35.1	Examples	224
35.1.1	<i>Tha figo na xechaso</i> (instrumental)	224
36	<i>Sechnaz Bouselik</i>	225
36.1	Examples	226
36.1.1	<i>Chatzikiriakio</i>	226
36.1.2	<i>O epaggelmatias</i> (instrumental)	226
36.1.3	<i>Pou na vro gineka na sou miazi</i>	227
37	<i>Segkiach</i>	228
37.1	Examples	229
37.1.1	<i>Den tha 'rtho pia stin Kokkinia</i>	229
37.1.2	<i>Genti Koule</i> (instrumental)	230
37.1.3	<i>I lachanades</i>	230
37.1.4	<i>O seretis</i>	231
37.1.5	<i>San egiriza ap' tin Pilo</i>	231
37.1.6	<i>San me dis ke sou sfirizo</i>	232
37.1.7	<i>Ta chanoumakia</i> (instrumental)	232
38	<i>Souznak</i>	233
38.1	Examples	234
38.1.1	<i>I Marika i daskala</i>	234
38.1.2	<i>Mas pirane chabari</i> (verse)	234
38.1.3	<i>To kalogeraki</i>	235
39	<i>Tsargkiach</i>	237
39.1	Examples	238
39.1.1	<i>Ftocho panoforaki mou</i>	238
39.1.2	<i>I fonografitzides</i>	238
39.1.3	<i>Kapio vradi me feggari</i>	239
39.1.4	<i>Sto Votaniko</i> (instrumental)	240

39.1.5	<i>Varka mou bogiatismeni</i>	240
40	<i>Zirgkiouleli Chitzaz</i>	241
40.1	Examples	242
40.1.1	<i>Argiles</i> (instrumental)	242
40.1.2	<i>Fantazes san prigkipesa</i>	242
40.1.3	<i>Mastouria</i> (verse)	243
40.1.4	<i>Matia machmourika</i>	244
40.1.5	<i>Misirlou</i>	245
40.1.6	<i>Mou ipan na mi s' agapo</i> (instrumental)	246
40.1.7	<i>Pali mou kanis ton vari</i> (instrumental)	246
40.1.8	<i>Tha figo na xechaso</i> (verse, coda)	246
41	<i>Zirgkiouleli Souznak</i>	248
41.1	Examples	249
41.1.1	<i>Enas magkas ston teke mou</i>	249
41.1.2	<i>Liono mistika</i> (verse)	249
41.1.3	<i>O charmanis</i> (instrumental)	250
41.1.4	<i>O Markos o Sirianos</i> (verse)	250
41.1.5	<i>O Memetis</i>	251
41.1.6	<i>Paraponiariko</i> (instrumental)	252
41.1.7	<i>Tatavoliani tsachpina</i> (instrumental)	252
41.1.8	<i>Tha s' to liso</i>	252
41.1.9	<i>Thalassino meraki</i> (verse)	253
	APPENDICES	256
	A. From Modality to Tonality	257
	B. The Rhythms of <i>Rebetiko</i>	259
	C. Key Signatures	261
	D. Ottoman Elements	263
	Bibliography · Discography	264
	Glossary	270
	Catalog of Music Examples	274
	Index	281

Preface

Attempting to write about *rebetiko* has always given me the impression of contending with a subject so intricate, elusive, and over-analyzed that any attempt to define it precisely seems nearly impossible without inevitably stumbling into unresolved terminological—or worse, ideological—debates. Perhaps this is because even the origins and the meaning of the word *rebetiko* itself remain the subject of entire books—without ever reaching a definitive answer. When drafting the introduction to this book, I was tempted to provide a historical overview and clarify some of the terminological ambiguities that persist to this day, confusing not only enthusiasts, but also scholars and musicians, both in Greece and abroad. Once again, I felt the overwhelming sensation of information slipping through my fingers—a flood of details impossible to condense into a concise introduction.

I imagine that anyone holding this book already has at least a basic understanding of what *rebetiko* is. After all, no one seeks out a theoretical exploration of this music without having experienced it in some way—whether by playing it or simply listening to it in a hazy Greek tavern, with a glass of *retsina* in hand and some *mezedes* on the table. For this reason, I decided to forego an extensive introduction and dive straight into the heart of the matter: *The Theory of Rebetiko*. I chose not to delve into its complex yet fascinating history, not to wade through endless sociological analyses, and not to attempt the daunting task of precisely defining what *rebetiko* is. Such endeavors would demand months of additional work and countless extra pages to an already substantial book. Readers interested in exploring other facets of *rebetiko* are encouraged to consult the bibliography. Additionally, I welcome anyone with questions, further insights, or a simple desire for a friendly discussion, to reach out to me through my website: www.carmelosisiliano.it.

Carmelo Siciliano

1 The Greek Modal System

1.1 Microtones and Interval Measurement

Most Greek music¹ is melodically defined by the use of musical intervals that differ from the tone and semitone of equal temperament. These intervals require dividing the octave into smaller units and are commonly referred to as "microtones". To describe and quantify microtones, an appropriate unit of measurement is necessary. The most commonly used unit is the "cent", which is equal to 1:100 of an equal-tempered semitone². The cent value of a musical interval is calculated using the formula: $1200 \log_2 x$, where x represents the ratio expressing the interval³. It is important to emphasize that microtones are just one—and not the only—defining characteristic of Greek modes. While they are not strictly indispensable, the entire Greek modal system can be effectively adapted to equal temperament. However, such adaptation inevitably results in a noticeable loss of pitch nuance⁴.

¹ Notable exceptions exist in certain repertoires, such as the *tabachaniotiko* of Crete, the *rebetiko* of Piraeus, and the *kantades* of the Ionian Islands, which are typically performed on equal-tempered instruments.

² Consequently, an equal-tempered tone has a value of 200 cents, an octave 1200 cents, etc.

³ For example, an equal-tempered tone interval is equal to $\sqrt[12]{2^2}$, so: $1200 \log_2 \sqrt[12]{2^2} = 200$ cents.

⁴ See section 3.5 on page 57.

1.2 Determining the Pitches

To understand the Greek modal system, it is essential to first identify the pitches that constitute it. These pitches are determined by the intervallic ratios between the degrees of two historically significant scales: the Pythagorean scale and the natural scale. Both scales serve as the starting point for the development of the two primary diatonic scales in Greek music: the hard diatonic scale and the soft diatonic scale.

1.2.1 The Pythagorean Scale

Pythagoras (570 B.C. – ca. 495 B.C.) identified the octave interval with the ratio 2:1 (1200 cents) and the fifth interval with the ratio 3:2 (ca. 702 cents⁵). By subtracting the octave from the fifth, Pythagoras derived the fourth⁶. He then calculated the remaining degrees of a diatonic scale by combining sums and differences of these ratios. The result was a scale consisting of two types of intervals:

- the "Pythagorean tone", derived from the difference between the Pythagorean fifth and fourth ($3:2 \div 4:3 = 9:8$, ca. 204 cents);
- the "Pythagorean diatonic semitone" or, more precisely, "*limma*"⁷, derived from the difference between the Pythagorean fourth and two Pythagorean tones ($4:3 \div 9:8 \div 9:8 = 256:243$, ca. 90 cents).

⁵ The Pythagorean fifth is slightly larger than the equal-tempered fifth, which is equal to $\sqrt[12]{2^7} = 700$ cents.

⁶ $2 \div 3:2 = 4:3$, ca. 498 cents.

⁷ From the ancient Greek *limma* (λείμμα), «remnant» or «residue».

2 The Elements

The Greek modal system can be explained using elements. An "element" is defined as a sequence of three, four, or five consecutive notes arranged in a specific intervallic structure. Each note within the sequence is called a "degree". Depending on the number of degrees, elements are categorized as follows: a "trichord" (3x) consists of three degrees, a "tetrachord" (4x) consists of four degrees, and a "pentachord" (5x) consists of five degrees (see figure 2.1).

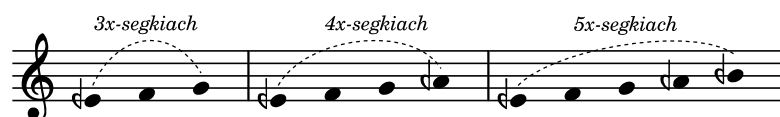


Figure 2.1: Example of a *segkiach* trichord, tetrachord, and pentachord.

Some elements appear exclusively as a trichord (e.g., *moustear* → 40), a tetrachord (e.g., *ousak* → 38), or a pentachord (e.g., *nikriz* → 43). Other elements may appear both as a tetrachord and a pentachord (e.g., *rast* → 35), or even in all three types (e.g., *segkiach* → 39).

2.1 Numbering the Degrees

The numbering of an element's degrees proceeds in ascending order from the lowest note. A trichord is composed of the I, II, and III degrees; a tetrachord is composed of the I, II, III, and IV degrees; and a pentachord is composed of the I, II, III, IV, and V degrees (see figure 2.2).

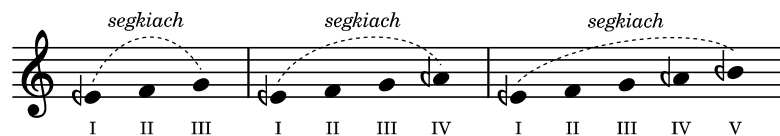


Figure 2.2: Numbering the degrees of a *segkiach* trichord, tetrachord, and pentachord.

2.2 Naming the Degrees

Each degree of an element is named according to its position within the sequence of notes. The I degree is referred to as the "basis" and is represented on the staff with an open notehead, unlike the other degrees, which are represented with a filled notehead. The last degree

3 The Modes

In order to understand the Greek modal system, it is essential to distinguish between the concepts of scale and mode. Regarding scales, among the various possible definitions¹, we can propose the following:

A scale is an ascending and/or descending sequence of notes, organized according to a specific intervallic structure, and spanning to the range of an octave; beyond this range, the structure repeats identically across octaves.

On the other hand, a possible definition of a mode — at least within the context of Greek music — could be as follows:

A mode is a sequence of musical phrases based on the combination of minimal intervallic structures (the "elements"); these phrases typically adhere to established melodic patterns (the "melodic paths"), which are governed by a hierarchy of the notes constituting the mode.

Beyond these definitions, the differences between a scale and a mode can be summarized as follows:

- a scale is typically defined within the range of an octave; a mode can also be defined within an octave, but may extend beyond or fall short of this range; in some cases, the octave interval may even be absent (e.g., *Saba* and *Bestenigkiar*);
- a scale repeats its intervallic structure identically across octaves; a mode often features varying intervallic structures in different octaves (e.g., *Bouselik* and *Nikriz*);
- in a scale, all degrees are treated equally, with no inherent hierarchy; in a mode, specific degrees have greater melodic importance, creating phenomena such as gravitation or melodic attraction².

¹ One of the most intriguing definitions of a scale comes from Jean-Jacques Nattiez: «A scale 1) consists of a succession of intervals; 2) determines a given number of pitches; 3) lacks privileged functions; 4) and all of this occurs within a given corpus» (NATTIEZ 1987: 33).

² See section 2.3 on page 30.

3.1 The Modes of *Rebetiko*

The modes of *rebetiko*, like those of most Greek music, can be described by three main characteristics: the functional degrees, the structure and position of the elements, and the modal dominants, which also govern the melodic behavior.

3.1.1 Functional Degrees and Their Numbering

Each mode is defined by a specific set of degrees, which are particularly important because they constitute its essence and distinct nature, distinguishing it from other modes with similar or even identical intervallic

31

31.1 Examples

31.1.1 *Chariklaki* (verse)

Chariklaki (Χαρικλάκι), a song by Panagiotis Tountas; singer: Rita Abatzi. Recording: Columbia DG-452, 1933. Transcription: microtonal. Meter: 4/4. The instrumental part (1-8) and the coda (26-40) follow the *Rechavi* mode. **6:** substitution of the fundamental element *5x-rast* on *rast* ⟨C⟩ with a *5x-nikriz* (the same at 38). The verse (9-25) follows the *Rast* mode. **16:** substitution of the fundamental element *5x-rast* on *rast* ⟨C⟩ with a *5x-nikriz* (the same at 18).



C°

6 Chtesto vra - di___

10 Cha-ri - kla - ki i-chespa - li___ t'or - ga - na - ki keglen-tou - ses___ m'e-na___ a - la - ni

15 ka-to sto Pa - sa - li - ma - ni fi - la - kia

20 na - za - kia ach vre Cha-ri-kla - ki___ pos me ge - la - ses ain-te gia sou mou tin e - ska - ses

26

33

38

31.1.2 *Echi i Ellada omorfies*

Echi i Ellada omorfies (Έχει η Ελλάδα ομορφιές), a song by Stavros Pantelidis; singer: Rita Abatzi. Recording: His Master's Voice AO-2350, 1936. Transcription: microtonal. Meter: 4/4. The song follows the *Rast* mode.



C°

5
Ta - xi - de - psa stin xe - ni - tia ma - nou - la__ mou i - da__ gli - kies ko - pe -

9
- les ma stin__ El - la - da vre pe - dia a - man a - man in' pio__ cha - ri - to - me -

13
- nes e - do__ se per - noun ta mia -

17
- la e__ re__ dou - nia m'af - ta__ tous ta kol - pa - kia cho - ris__ na fte - i - o fou - ka -

21
- ras e re kai - mos se va - zoun sta me - ra - kia

24
a - man tha to__ 'chi to__ ne - ro

28
ach re__ ma ton__ sta - vro o - pou__ ki an gi - ri - sa vre de__ si - nin - ti - sa ach te - ties e - mor - fies

32
me flo - ge - res ma - ties e - do__ mes stin El - la - da__ skla - vo - noun tis kar - dies

Glossary

Araban (αραμπάν, tr. *arabân*): the *chitzaz* element with soft character.

From the word *‘arab*, «Arab», combined with the Persian suffix *-ân*, used to form the plural: «Arabs».

Asiran (ασιράν, tr. *aşîrân*): term used to indicate the lower-octave positions of *chouseini* (*chouseini asiran*¹), *atzem* (*atzem asiran*²), and *dik atzem* (*dik atzem asiran*³).

Atzem (ατζέμ, tr. *acem*): a position⁴ and a mode. Derived from the Arabic *‘ajam*, «Persian» (originally «non-Arab»).

Begiati (μπεγιατί, tr. *bayâtî*): an element (sometimes used in place of *chouseini*, *dougkiach*, and *ousak*) and a mode. Derived from the Arabic *bayātî*, «nocturnal». In KESKINER (s.d.: 7-8): «of the Bayat», one of the ancient tribes of the Oghuz Turks.

Bestenigkiar (μπεστενιγκιάρ, tr. *beste-nigâr*): a mode. Possibly derived from the Persian *baste*, «closed», «shut», and *nigâr*, «beauty», «portrait». In KESKINER (s.d.: 7): «bound to the beloved».

Bouselik (μπουσελίκ, tr. *bûselik*): a position⁵, an element, and a mode. Derived from the Persian *buse*, «kiss», combined with the Turkish suffix *-lik*, used to form abstract nouns or to indicate a quality, condition, or characteristic of something. In KROKIDIS (1972: 35) and STATHAKOPOULOS (2021: 144): «greeting», «embrace».

Chisar (χισάρ, tr. *hisâr*): a position⁶, an element, and a mode. Derived from the Arabic *ḥisâr*, «siege of a fortress».

Chitzaz (χιτζάζ, tr. *hicâz*): a position⁷, an element, and a mode. It refers to Hijaz, the northwestern region of the Arabian Peninsula.

Chitzazkiar (χιτζαζκιάρ, tr. *hicâzkâr*): a mode. From *chitzaz* (see on the current page), combined with the Persian suffix *-kâr*, «work», «creation», «one who performs». In KROKIDIS (1972: 36) and STATHAKOPOULOS (2021: 144): «doubling».

Choumagioun (χουμαγιούν, tr. *hûmâyûn*): an element and a mode. Derived from the Persian *humây*, «fortune», «auspice», combined with the suffix *-ûn*, used to form adjectives. In DURING (2005: 155), KROKIDIS (1972: 35), NETTL (1992: 27) and STATHAKOPOULOS (2021: 143): «regal», «majestic».

¹ $\underline{\text{A}}$ (Greek) / E (Ottoman).

² $\underline{\text{Bb}}$ (Greek) / F (Ottoman).

³ $\underline{\text{Bb}}$ (Greek) / F \sharp (Ottoman).

⁴ Bb (Greek) / $\overline{\text{F}}$ (Ottoman).

⁵ E (Greek) / B (Ottoman).

⁶ G \sharp (Greek) / $\overline{\text{D}}\sharp$ (Ottoman).

⁷ F \sharp (Greek) / $\overline{\text{C}}\sharp$ (Ottoman).

Catalog of Music Examples

TITLE	METER	VERSE	INSTRUMENTAL	CODA	PAGE
<i>Adiase mou ti gonia</i>	4/4	<i>Neveser</i>	<i>Neveser</i>	<i>Nichavent semidiat.</i>	162
<i>Adinatisa o kaimenos</i>	9/8	<i>Mouchagier</i>	<i>Mouchagier</i>		147
<i>Aeroplano tha paro</i>	4/4	<i>Ousak+Kartsigiar</i>	<i>Dougkiach</i>		182
<i>Agiothodoritissa</i>	4/8	<i>Machour</i>	<i>Machour</i>		138
<i>Alana Pireotissa</i>	4/4	<i>Chouzam</i>	<i>Chouzam</i>		106
<i>Alaniara meraklou</i>	4/4	<i>Ousak</i>	<i>Ousak</i>		183
<i>Alithini agapi</i>	4/4	<i>Saba</i>	<i>Saba</i>		214
<i>Apefasisa pouli mou</i>	9/4	<i>Araban</i>	<i>Araban</i>		64
<i>Apo kato ap' tis domates</i>	9/4	<i>Kiourdi</i>	<i>Kiourdi</i>		129
<i>Aponi Tourkala</i>	7/4	<i>Bestenigkiar</i>	<i>Bestenigkiar</i>		69
<i>Apsilies</i>	4/4	<i>Araban</i>	<i>Araban</i>		64
<i>Argile mou giati svinis</i>	9/4	<i>Kiourdi</i>	<i>Mouchagier Kiourdi</i>		129
<i>Argiles</i>	9/4	<i>Chitzaz</i>	<i>Zirgkiouleli Chitzaz</i>		77
<i>Baglamades</i>	9/4	<i>Kiourdi</i>	<i>Kiourdi</i>	<i>Chitzaz</i>	130
<i>Chariklaki</i>	4/4	<i>Rast</i>	<i>Rechavi</i>	<i>Rechavi</i>	202
<i>Chatzikiriakio</i>	4/8	<i>Sechnaz Bouselik</i>	<i>Sechnaz Bouselik</i>		226
<i>Chtes to vradi sto skotadi</i>	9/4	<i>Nichavent</i>	<i>Nichavent</i>		168
<i>De me toubaris</i>	9/4	<i>Kiourdi</i>	<i>Kiourdi</i>		131
<i>De s' agapo de s' agapo</i>	4/8	<i>Ouzal</i>	<i>Ouzal</i>		190
<i>Den tha 'rtho pia stin Kokkinia</i>	9/4	<i>Segkiach~Rast</i>	<i>Segkiach</i>		229
<i>Den ton thelo mana mou</i>	9/4	<i>Dougkiach (atzem)</i>	<i>Dougkiach (atzem)</i>		113
<i>Dervisena</i>	9/4	<i>Chouzam</i>	<i>Chouzam</i>		107
<i>Dervisis ke Rita</i>	9/4	<i>Nikriz</i>	<i>Nikriz</i>		176
<i>Diamanto alaniara</i>	9/4	<i>Machour</i>	<i>Machour</i>		139
<i>Dodeka chrono koritsi</i>	9/4	<i>Kiourdi</i>	<i>Kiourdi</i>		132
<i>Echi i Ellada omorfies</i>	4/4	<i>Rast</i>	<i>Rast</i>		203
<i>Ego ime i bolsevika</i>	4/4	<i>Chitzaz</i>	<i>Chitzaz</i>		78
<i>Eleni Elenara mu</i>	4/4	<i>Ousak</i>	<i>Ousak</i>		184
<i>Elliniki apolafsis</i>	various	<i>Machour</i>	<i>Machour</i>	<i>Pireotiko+Machour</i>	140
<i>Enas magkas ston teke mu</i>	9/4	<i>Zirgkiouleli Souznak</i>	<i>Zirgkiouleli Souznak</i>		249
<i>Etsi Marika dechome</i>	4/4	<i>Ousak</i>	<i>Ousak</i>		184
<i>Fantazes san prigkipesa</i>	9/4	<i>Zirgkiouleli Chitzaz</i>	<i>Zirgkiouleli Chitzaz</i>		242
<i>Feretzes</i>	4/4	<i>Chitzaz</i>	<i>Chitzaz</i>		79
<i>Ferte preza na prezaro</i>	7/8	<i>Chitzaz (atzem)</i>	<i>Chitzaz (atzem)</i>		80
<i>Ftocho panoforaki mou</i>	9/4	<i>Tsargkiach</i>	<i>Tsargkiach</i>		238
<i>Gelasmenos</i>	9/4	<i>Chouzam</i>	<i>Chouzam</i>		108
<i>Genti Koule</i>	4/4	<i>Evits+Segkiach~Rast</i>	<i>Segkiach~Rast</i>		118
<i>Gia na xeris</i>	9/4	<i>Chitzaz</i>	<i>Mouchagier Chitzaz</i>		81
<i>Giati na kathese na les</i>	9/4	<i>Kiotzek</i>	<i>Dougkiach</i>		100
<i>Giovan Tsaios</i>	9/4	<i>Zavil</i>	<i>Zavil</i>		141
<i>Girno san nichterida</i>	4/4	<i>Ouzal</i>	<i>Choumagioun Chitzaz</i>		190
<i>Gkamilieriko</i>	9/4	<i>Rast</i>	<i>Rast</i>		204
<i>Gkarsona</i>	4/8	<i>Nichavent</i>	<i>Neveser+Nikriz</i>		168
<i>I Armenitsa</i>	4/4	<i>Ousak</i>	<i>Ousak</i>		185
<i>I dio seretes</i>	9/4	<i>Kiourdi</i>	<i>Kiourdi</i>		132
<i>I exi entoles</i>	9/4	<i>Neveser</i>	<i>Neveser</i>		163
<i>I filakes tou Oropou</i>	9/4	<i>Saba</i>	<i>Saba</i>		214
<i>I foni tou argile</i>	9/8	<i>Ouzal</i>	<i>Ouzal</i>		191
<i>I fonografitzides</i>	9/4	<i>Tsargkiach</i>	<i>Tsargkiach</i>		238
<i>I kamomatou</i>	7/4	<i>Rechavi</i>	<i>Rechavi</i>	<i>Petzgkiach~Sazkiar</i>	210

Index

- 12-TET 20
- apotome* 20
- Araban*, mode 4, 63
- araban*, element 42
- Archytas 21
- attraction 30
- basis 29, 46
- Begiati*, mode 4, 67
- begiati*, element 38
- behavior 48
- Bestenigkiar*, mode 4, 69
- Bouselik*, mode 4, 71
- bouselik*, element 3, 33
- cent 19
- character 31
- chisar*, element 4, 44
- Chisar Bouselik*, mode 4, 71
- Chitzaz*, mode 5, 76
- chitzaz*, element 3, 41
- Chitzazkiar*, mode 5, 89
- Choumagioun*, mode 5, 94
- choumagioun*, element 4, 44
- Choumagioun Chitzaz*, mode 5, 97
- Chouseini*, mode 5, 99
- chouseini*, element 38
- Chouzam*, mode 6, 106
- comma
 - artificial 23
 - Didymus' 22
 - Pythagorean 20
- degree 29
 - intermediate 30
- Didymus 21
- dominant 46
- Dougiach*, mode 6, 112
- dougiach*, element 3, 38
- dromos* 58, 59
- element 29
- Evits*, mode 6, 117
- ferachnak*, element 40
- final 46
- flat 24, 25
- genus 31
- Gkerdanie*, mode 6, 121
- gravitation 30
- hybridization 49
- incipit* 46
- interaction 49
- just noticeable difference 20
- Kartsigiar*, mode 6, 124
- Kiotzek*, mode 5, 99
- Kiourdi*, mode 6, 128
- kiourdi*, element 3, 34
- limma* 19
- Machour*, mode 7, 137
- makam* 58
- Mercator, Nicolaus 23
- micro-attraction 30
- microtone 19
- mode 45
 - reentrant 46
 - suspended 46
- mono-flat 25
- mono-sharp 25
- Mouchagier*, mode 7, 146
- Mouchagier Chitzaz*, mode 7, 151
- Mouchagier Kiourdi*, mode 7, 155
- Moustear*, mode 8, 160
- moustear*, element 3, 40
- Neveser*, mode 8, 161
- Nichavent*, mode 8, 167
- nichavent*, element 3, 33
- Nikriz*, mode 8, 175
- nikriz*, element 4, 43
- numbering of degrees 29, 47
- Ousak*, mode 8, 181
- ousak*, element 38
- Ouzal*, mode 9, 189
- peak 30
- penta-sharp 25
- pentachord 29
- Petzgiach*, mode 9, 195
- petzgiach*, element 3, 37
- Pireotiko*, mode 9, 197
- pireotiko*, element 3, 42
- position 47

Carmelo Siciliano's *Theory of Rebetiko* presents a comprehensive exploration of the Greek modal system as it relates to the repertoire commonly known as *rebetiko*. The book offers a clear and coherent framework, both for newcomers to this genre of Greek music and for those familiar with other modal traditions, such as the Ottoman *makam* or Byzantine music. The volume includes:

41 **MODES AND DROMI:** *Araban, Begiati, Bestenigkiar, Bouselik, Chisar Bouselik, Chitzaz, Chitzazkiar, Choumagioun, Choumagioun Chitzaz, Chouseini, Chouzam, Dougkiach, Evits, Gkerdanie, Kartsigiar, Kiotzek, Kiourdi, Machour, Mouchagier, Mouchagier Chitzaz, Mouchagier Kiourdi, Moustear, Neveser, Nichavent, Nikriz, Ousak, Ouzal, Petzgkiach, Pireotiko, Rast, Rechavi, Saba, Sazkiar, Sechnaz, Sechnaz Bouselik, Segkiach, Souznak, Tsargkiach, Zavil, Zirgkiouleli Chitzaz, Zirgkiouleli Souznak;*

166 **MUSICAL EXAMPLES** representative of the repertoire, selected from the works of the most prominent composers, such as Grigoris Asikis, Giorgos Batis, Anestis Delias, Antonis Diamantidis, Iakovos Montanaris, Dimitris Semsis, Kostas Skarvelis, Panagiotis Tountas, Markos Vamvakaris and more; each example is transcribed on the staff using either microtonal or equal-tempered notation and is accompanied by information about the composer, singer, recording, rhythm employed, and modal analysis;

QR **CODES** that provide direct links for listening to the musical examples on your smartphone or tablet.

CARMELO SICILIANO was born in Catania, Italy, in 1980. For years, he has devoted himself to studying, researching, and promoting his lifelong passion: the traditional culture of Greece. A musician, educator, and cultural music disseminator, he is the founder and president of the FILELLENIA Cultural Society — *Center for the Study, Documentation, and Education on Greek Music, Dance, and Traditions*. He is also the author of several works, including: *Sentire la Grecia: In viaggio fra musiche e tradizioni* («Listening to Greece: A Journey Through Music and Traditions», 2019); *Greek Folk Music: An Anthology of Tunes*, vol. 1 (2021); *I canti greci di Niccolò Tommaseo: Riscontri musicali nella Grecia odierna* («The Greek Songs of Niccolò Tommaseo: Musical Parallels in Contemporary Greece», 2021); *Canti di Grecia: Con testo greco a fronte, traduzione e note*, vol. 1 («Songs of Greece: With Greek Text, Translation, and Notes», 2022).

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