



Breaking the taboo ... Sotiria Bellou defied tradition by sitting while she sang *rebetika*

Sotiria Bellou

## The voice of Greek music

**I**N 1948, during the Greek Civil War, the singer Sotiria Bellou, who has died aged 75, was playing in an Athenian club when a group, largely comprised of former Nazi collaborators, ordered her to sing a pro-monarchy song. Bellou, a republican who had been tortured during the German occupation, refused to oblige. Under a hail of blows, defending herself with a fork, she collapsed, still refusing to perform the hated song.

Bellou was the last and perhaps greatest female singer of *rebetika*, which mirrors within Greek music the role of the blues or Argentina's tango. And Bellou had *ifos* — interweaving character and style with the ability to command respect. Despite a tormented life, she never lost her sense of fun or the ability to fight back.

Sotiria Bellou was born in Halkida, to a prosperous family. She persuaded her father to buy her a guitar after seeing the film *Prosfigopoula* (*Refugee*), with the singer and icon of the day, Sophia Bembo. She spent hours singing her songs and imitating her style.

At 17 she married. For the first few months, her husband drank heavily, slept with other women and beat her. Sotiria put an end to his behaviour by throwing vitriol at

his face — and was imprisoned for six months. The marriage was over, and she vowed to remain single.

Her family condemned her and she left home, penniless, for Athens in 1940 just as war was breaking out. As starvation gripped the capital she worked as occasional maid, sold cigarettes and sesame seed cakes and often slept rough. They were desperate days. Following liberation, she joined the December 1944 uprising against the monarchy and was wounded by a British mortar shell.

In a city of traumatised refugees, Bellou used her savings to buy a guitar and start singing. Discovered by *rebetika* composer Vassilis Tsitsanis, she cut her first record and her career took off. In 1948, she "broke the chair". Tradition had it that only male musicians could sit in a row facing the audience. One night, Bellou took a chair, marked her space, sat down — and broke a taboo. She went on to sing with the masters of *rebetika*.

Bellou enjoyed talking "women" with her male friends. Her hair was short, and she favoured male jackets and shirts with sharp collars. Her voice was unmistakably that of a woman, minus the femininity. In its intensity, it could express the tragedies of her nation without ever slipping

into emotionalism, like a sure pair of arms that could hold *ponos* (pain), while allowing listeners to keep their dignity.

Millions of Greeks needed that emotional support — and artists like Bellou — to release their safety valves, following the country's tragic 20th century odyssey. Rich and poor, laymen and cabinet ministers, all found comfort in her style. After losing her popularity during the 1960s, she was rediscovered by a new generation in the late 1970s when Savvopoulos, the musical voice of post-Junta Greece, invited her to sing on one of his albums the *rebetika* song *'A' aeroplana kai vaporia* (with airplanes and ships).

A heavy smoker, generous with her money, spartan with her words and a compulsive gambler, she lost many a fortune, including three houses. A leftwinger, she was deeply religious in the Orthodox faith. In 1994, she lost her voice from cancer and, despite financial help from the Greek state, was at times obliged to sell tapes of her songs in central Athens. Many Greeks will feel her loss.

### Constantine Buhayer

Sotiria Bellou, singer, born August 22, 1922; died August 27, 1997