

Agapios Tomboulis: an attempt at resuscitation

by Hugo Strötbaum

How to get a Dutchman on the trail of hidden treasures in Athens is perhaps a bizarre story... It must have been in the eighties, at a Greek concert in Utrecht, that I first met Stavriana Livadarou and her husband Harry Gen. Stavriana, who knew that I was involved with *rebetika*, had once told me that her family had been close to the family and friends of Agapios Tomboulis, and that there might be an interesting story here.

For the uninitiated: Agapios¹ Tomboulis was a famous *oud* player of Armenian birth, born in Constantinople. At a certain point he moved to Greece, where he subsequently lived for many years, playing an important role in the musical life of the country. With his *oud* (oriental lute), he mainly accompanied singers. The name Tomboulis suited him well, because "*tombul*" means "chubby, fat" in Turkish, and Agapios was indeed a chubby guy. Given his surname, this may perhaps have been a family trait.

Occasionally Stavriana reminded me that I really needed to talk to her mother, because she could tell me all kind of things about Tomboulis; but, one way or another, the '*Tomboulis project*' did not get off the ground at this time. Maybe it was because Tomboulis was not a musician who occupied the limelight. He was known as an accompanist to singers, of which Roza Eskenazi - also from Istanbul - was the most famous. Tomboulis was the man who always took care of a solid melodic - rhythmic base. Besides the *oud*, Tomboulis also played a number of other instruments. In many old photographs in the book *Rebetika Tragoudia*² of Ilias Petropoulos we see him with a *cümbüş*³, a *toumbeleki*, and two as yet unidentified stringed instruments with a round wooden body.

A good start is half the work

When we had once more conceived a plan to go on holiday to Greece in the autumn, it seemed like a good opportunity to finally tackle the Tomboulis project seriously. I called Stavriana and explained my plans. She immediately pledged her full cooperation. Meanwhile, however, her mother had unfortunately deceased, so that an important

¹ 'Agapios' is the Greek version of the Armenian name 'Hagop'.

² Ilias Petropoulos' book *Rebetika Tragoudia* is published by Kedros (Athens, 1983) and is full of lyrics and authentic photographs from around the rebétika period.

³ A stringed instrument of Turkish (Istanbul) origin, consisting of a round metal pan with a skin stretched over the opening, and a fretless long neck. In fact, a kind of large banjo, with a similar sound.

source of first-hand information about Tomboulis was now lost. But something had already awakened in me, because of the following. During one of our last meetings Harry Gen had shown us some beautiful colour photographs, which he had taken in Athens during a visit to Tomboulis' granddaughter. I could hardly believe my eyes. There were pictures of Tomboulis' *oud* (lute), of his *toumbeleki* (metal vase drum), his *zilia* (finger cymbals) and even of the tuning pipe he used to tune his instruments.





So - a number of original Tomboulis instruments were still in existence! There was also a photo of a curious kind of flat round twelve-string *oud*. At the end of the neck, on the headstock, was a metal plate bearing the words ΕΦΕΥΡΗΣΙΣ ΤΟΜΠΟΥΛΑ[H] (Invention of Tomboulis)⁴. Would that instrument have been built by Tomboulis himself, or was it made by a professional instrument maker on his instructions?

⁴ There is a famous photograph of Tomboulis with Roza Eskenazi and Dimitris Semsis (nicknamed 'Salonikios'). In that picture he has another strange twelve-stringed instrument in his hands, which looks more like a wooden version of a Turkish *çümbüs*. Recently, I found out that there is in fact a similar metal plate on that instrument. The words on this plate had not been discernible on hitherto published versions of that picture, but in the recently released DVD about Roza Eskenazi, "My Sweet Canary", there is a very good reproduction of this photo in which the words 'ΕΦΕΥΡΗΣΙΣ ΤΟΜΠΟΥΛΑ[H]' can clearly be seen. At one time the 'H' must have broken off (see DVD: Time: 46.47 – 46.53, Title: 2/8, Chapter: 12/18)

Consulting the sparse literature about Tomboulis, I found that sadly little was known about him. To begin with, there were obvious differences of opinion on when he was born. I found four different birth years: 1884, 1887, 1891 and 1893. There was also disagreement on the date of his death. That he was born in Constantinople (Istanbul) was fortunately undisputed.

As it turned out, I asked Stavriana if she would contact Aleka – the granddaughter of Agapios Tomboulis, and Stavriana's childhood friend - and tell her of my plans to put her grandfather's life on the map. Then I wrote a long letter to the granddaughter and explained what information and material I was looking for. I added my first provisional Tomboulis file, accompanied by quite a few questions. Aleka wrote back, saying that we were welcome.

Meanwhile I heard from Stavriana - and later in Athens also from granddaughter Aleka - how it was that both families had such close ties. It turned out that Stavriana's parents had lived in the Vyrona Tomboulis family home for a few years, from late 1943 to 1947. Stavriana's father and Aleka's father knew each other because they worked for the same company: the ΔΕΗ, or Δημόσια Επιχείρηση Ηλεκτρισμού ΑΕ, the Greek electricity company. Towards the end of 1943 Stavriana's family became homeless through the bombing of Athens by the British, and Tomboulis family decided to take in the Livadaros family into their home, as Dimitra - Stavriana's mother - was pregnant. They loaded their remaining household goods onto a cart and walked all the way from the Gizi neighbourhood to the Tomboulis family home in Vyrona. And so, a few months later, Stavriana's mother gave birth to her first child, a boy. Tomboulis' daughter Chrysavvi became its *nona* (godmother). After the war, Stavriana's family moved back to Gizi, but both families remained in close contact.

On to Vyrona, Athens!

In October 2011 the cold-case team left for Greece. I arrived in Athens, called Tomboulis' granddaughter, and made an appointment for the next day at her home in the Vyrona district - the same house where her grandfather Agapios and his family had lived. Aleka and her husband Christos received us warmly. After our first meeting a pile of old photos soon appeared on the table. There were photos of Tomboulis in various poses and situations and from different periods; alone, with his wife, with his wife and children, with Roza Eskenazi, and with other musicians. When we had seen all the photos, Tomboulis' instruments were brought out: the *oud*, a *toumbeleki*, and also that weird round string instrument of which Harry Gen had taken a photo.

In between, I made notes of what Aleka and Christos told us. On these occasions Paula, my wife, acts as a sort of second (and often better) memory. At our parting Aleka and Christos invited us for dinner on the following Saturday. This was an excellent idea, because there was still much research to be done here. Meanwhile, we were able to process all the information and come up with new questions.

Light in the darkness

The Saturday started all right: Aleka and Christos produced an official document from 1983, an extract from the Athens register of population, containing very detailed information on three Tomboulis generations. I read that Agapios Tomboulis came into the world in 1884 in Istanbul as the son of Ilias and Froso⁵ and that he died in Vyrona, Athens, on September 17, 1967. His first wife was called Froso, and from that marriage two children emerged, Ilias and Frangoulis.

⁵ Possible error. Other sources report that Tomboulis' mother was called Peristera.

ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΔΗΜΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ
ΝΟΜΑΡΧΙΑ ΑΤΤΙΚΗΣ
ΔΙΑΜΕΡΙΣΜΑ ΑΘΗΝΩΝ
ΔΗΜΟΣ ΒΥΡΩΝΑ
ΓΡΑΦΕΙΟ ΔΗΜΟΤΟΛΟΓΙΟΥ



ΑΡΧΙΒΕΣ ΟΤΟΜΑΝΙΚΩΝ ΠΡΩΤΟΚΟΛΛΩΝ
ΑΠΟ ΤΟ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΚΡΑΤΟΣ
ΝΑΕΒΟΙ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟΥ ΚΡΑΤΟΣ
ΕΥΡΩΠΗΣ 29-4-97

Βύρωνας 28-2-1983

Αρ.Πρωτ.:



Ο Δήμαρχος Βύρωνας
Πιστοποιεί ότι:

Ὅς προκύπτει ἐκ τῶν παρ' ἡμῶν τηρουμένων Δ/γίων ὡς καὶ ἐκ τῆς ὑπ' ἀρ. 119092/24-2-83 ἐνόρκου βεβαίωσης δύο μαρτύρων ἐνόρκιων τῆς Σ/φου Βύρωνας Θεοδώρας συζ. Νικολάου Συκιάτη-Παπαγαλάνη, ὁ ἀποβιάσας ἐν Βύρωνι τὴν 17-9-67 (ΑΠΘ.15/ΚΑ/67ΑηΞ. Ἀθηνῶν) Ἀγάπιος Τομπούλης τοῦ Ἰλῆα καὶ τῆς ὀρφῆς ἐγγεγραμμένος στὰ Δ/γία μας με ἀριθμὸ 7486 καὶ ἔτος γεννήσεως 1884 (ὀκτακάσια ὀγδόνα τεσσέρα) εἰς Κων/πολὴ εἰς ὅς τὰ κ. Ἀρρένων τοῦ Δήμου Ἀθηναίων με ἀριθμὸ 49012 κάτοικος ἐν ζωῇ Βύρωνος κατέλιπεν ἐγγυτέρω αὐτοῦ συγγενεῖς κατὰ τὸν χρόνον τοῦ θανάτου του τοὺς ἑξῆς:

1) Τὴν σύζυγόν του ἐκ δευτέρου γάμου Ἀλεξάνδρα τὸ γένος Μιχαήλ καὶ Αἰκατερίνης Ταστῆ ἐγγεγραμμένην στὰ Δ/γία μας με ἀριθμὸ 7486 καὶ ἔτος γεννήσεως 1895 (ὀκτακάσια ἐνενηντὰ πέντε) ἥτις ἀπεβίωσεν τὴν 29-1-1976 καὶ οὕτω ἀπέμειναν ἐγγυτέρω συγγενεῖς καὶ σήμερον ἐν ζωῇ εὐρισκόμενοι οἱ ἑξῆς: 1) Ὁ υἱὸς του Ἰλῆας Ἀγαπίου Τομπούλης ἄγαμος, 2) Ὁ υἱὸς του Φραγκοῦλης Ἀγαπίου Τομπούλης ἄγαμος. Τέκνα γνήσια ἐκ τοῦ πρώτου γάμου τοῖ μετὰ τῆς ὀρφῆς καὶ 3) Τὴν θυγατέραν του ἀγῆ σὺζ. Γεωργίου Τράνα τὸ γένος Ἀγαπίου Τομπούλη γεννηθεῖσα τὸ 1923 (ἐξῆκοι τρεῖς) ἄγαμον τέκνον γνήσιον ἐκ τοῦ δευτέρου γάμου τοῦ μετὰ τῆς Ἀλεξάνδρας τὸ γένος Μιχαήλ Ταστῆ. Πλὴν τούτων οὐδένα ἕτερον κατέλιπεν, οὕτε τέκνα δευτῆ, οὕτε ἀνεγνωρισμένα, οὕτε νομιμοποιημένα, οὕτε ἕτερα γνήσια οὕτε τέκνα προαποβιώσαντων τούτων τέκνων οὕτε τέκνα ἐξ ἄλλου γάμου ἐκτός τῶν ἀνωτέρω ἀναφερομένων οὕτε ὄνιόντας.

Τῇ αἰτίσει τοῦ Γεωργίου Τράνα ἐκδίδεται τὸ παρὸν γιὰ κάθε νόμιμη χρῆσιν.

Ὁ ἐπὶ τῶν Δ/γίων

Ὁ Δήμαρχος
καὶ με εἰδ. ἐντολή

Ἀγγ. Πηδουλάκης



Αἰκὴ Τσοῦκα
ΤΜΗΜΑΤΑΡΧΗΣ Β'

But Aleka told us that there had been a *third* son called Yorgos. It turned out that Yorgos was shot and killed by the Germans in a raid during WWII, which explained why his name did not occur in the 1983 document. In 1923 Agapios Tomboulis remarried to

Alexandra Tachtsis. His daughter Avyi, or Chrysavyi, was born within this marriage, and Aleka, our hostess, was her daughter in turn.

However, there was another surprise waiting for us! Aleka's husband Christos had scanned all the old photos to file on a CD-ROM. The evening could not go wrong.

And so to the oudóla

Of course, I have not known Tomboulis personally, but from the stories of Stavriana, and granddaughter Aleka, he emerged as a pleasant, good-natured, cheerful personality, with a great sense of humour. Most pictures of Tomboulis show that clearly. Stavriana can still get excited when she talks about the fantastic atmosphere in the Tomboulis home. Recently I discovered, in the book *Rebetika Tragoudia*, a short excerpt from an interview that Petropoulos had made in 1972 with Alexandra, Tomboulis' wife. Alexandra talks about the instruments her husband played: "My husband, Agapios Tomboulis, played *oud*, *oudóla*, banjo (= *cümbüş*), *defi* (tambourine) and *toumbano* (vase drum). And he also played *zília* (finger cymbals). And if he was somewhere and he had no instrument with him, then he would grab a tray and begin to beat it. *Bam - bam - bam*, on he would go. Sometimes he did a village sheep imitation: ... *beee beee*. Then he tied sheep bells to his leg and he sang - oh, how my darling would sing - and he called *beee beee* while the bells jingled. He also had a different kind of *oud*, a round one, that he called an "*oudóla*". He said how he wanted the instrument made, and others built it for him, just as a seamstress makes a dress. It was his own invention ...:⁶

When I was reading this over the phone to Stavriana, she responded delightedly and said: "It's like I hear Alexandra's voice!"

So that strange flat round instrument was called an *oudóla*! Based on existing photos we can now conclude that Tomboulis owned (at least) three *oudólas*.

Tomboulis: artist and composer

Agapios Tomboulis is to be heard on countless recordings from the period 1929-1960: on a few as a soloist, but mostly as an accompanist on the *oud*. There are also recordings where he sings, in Greek and in Turkish. No wonder, since he originally came from Istanbul. Tomboulis also has a number of compositions to his credit including "Μπαμ Και Μπουμ Μη Τρως" (Bam and boom, do not eat) and "Έλα Δημητρούλα Μ'έλα" (Come My Dimitroula Come)⁷, the latter a song from 1951 dedicated by Tomboulis to

⁶ The original Greek text can be found on page 267 of *Rebetika Tragoudia* by Ilias Petropoulos.

⁷ (Σ)αν σε βλέπω Δημητρούλα, ευθύς μου πιάνει μια τρεμούλα
και σαν βόμβα ατομική, χάνω φως και λογική

Έλα, έλα-έλα, έλα Δημητρούλα μ'έλα, στ'άγμε σβύσε θα σε πάρω, με παπά και με κουμπάρο.
Έλα Δημητρούλα μ'έλα, πριν μου έρθει καμμιά τρέλα.

Stavriana's mother, Dimitra, and recorded by Roza⁸. There is still a lot of research needed before the definitive biography of Agapios Tomboulis can be written. This is only the beginning...

Translated from the Dutch by Tony Klein, Sept 16th 2013.

<http://www.recordingpioneers.com/docs/grurks/ODDoudolas.pdf>

Σαν τρελός θα τριγυρίζω, μες τα στενάκια σου δακρύζω,
μη τυχόν και σε τρακάρω, δυο φιλάκια σου θα πάρω.

*Έλα, έλα-έλα, έλα Δημητρούλα μ'έλα, στ'άψε σβύσε θα σε πάρω, με παπά και με κουμπάρο.
Έλα Δημητρούλα μ'έλα, πριν μου έρθει καμμιά τρέλα.*

Τώρα πια θ'αποφασίσω τη μαμά σου να γνωρίσω,
να της πω πως θα σε πάρω και στεφάνι θα σου βάλω.

*Έλα, έλα-έλα, έλα Δημητρούλα μ'έλα, στ'άψε σβύσε θα σε πάρω, με παπά και με κουμπάρο.
Έλα Δημητρούλα μ'έλα, πριν μου έρθει καμμιά τρέλα.*

This song is not to be confused with the famous composition by Panayotis Toundas, “*Dimitroula Mou*”, one of Roza Eskenazi's other successes.

⁸ Both songs (“*Έλα Δημητρούλα Μ'έλα*” and “*Δημητρούλα Μου*”) can be heard on YouTube.

DISCOGRAPHY

MATRIX No.	FACE No.	COUPLING.	TITLE	ARTIST(S)	LABEL	REC. DATE (ATHENS)
WG 532	?	DG 334	<i>Το μαναθάκι</i>	Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (συνθέτης/στιχουργός) source: Γενικός Κατάλογος 1934 : Δίσκοι COLUMBIA	COLUMBIA	between 03-06-1933 and 31-07-1933
CG 1208	?	DG 6111	<i>Τουρκοπούλα</i>	Αυγούλα Τομπούλη & Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals?)	COLUMBIA	1934
CG 1223	?	DG 6111	<i>Το ερωτευμένο Τσοπανόπουλο - συρτός</i>	Ηλίας Τόμης & Αυγή Τομπούλη (& Ιάκ. Ηλίας) & Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals?) - συν. Ι. Πετροπούλος	COLUMBIA	1934
CG 1385	?	DG 6201	<i>Τσούπρα μ' το μαντήλι σου (συνθ. Αγάπιος Τομπούλης)</i>	Ρόζα Εσκενάζη, Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (ούτι) plaat opzoecken	COLUMBIA	Jan-June 1936
BG 119-1	30-1698	AO 304	<i>Χορός Δερβίσικος</i>	Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (ούτι) / Λάμπρος Λεονταρίδης (λύρα πολιτική)	HMV	27-05-1929
BG 120-1	30-1709	AO 333	<i>Χορός Λάζικος</i>	Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (ούτι) / Λάμπρος Λεονταρίδης (λύρα πολιτική)	HMV	27-05-1929
BG 121-1	30-1712	AO 334	<i>Χορός Ανατολίτικος</i>	Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (ούτι) / Λάμπρος Λεονταρίδης (λύρα πολιτική)	HMV	27-05-1929
BW 3031-1	30-2884	AO 390	<i>Τσίφτε-τέλι</i>	Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (ούτι) / Λάμπρος Λεονταρίδης (λύρα πολιτική)	HMV	03-12-1929
BW 3029-1	30-2885	AO 391	<i>Γενί Μπαχριέ (Yeni Bahriye)</i>	Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (ούτι) / Λάμπρος Λεονταρίδης (λύρα πολιτική)	HMV	03-12-1929
OW 103	150-654	AO 1011	<i>Καρίτ Μασατζίρ Κάντο (Garip Muhacir kanto)</i>	Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals) (με λύρα, ούτι και κιθάρα)	HMV	12-05-1931
OW 104	150-655	AO 1011	<i>Καρίτ Νινί Γκαζέλ (Garip Ninni kanto)</i>	Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals) (με λύρα, ούτι και κιθάρα)	HMV	12-05-1931
OT 13xx/14xx	150-822	AO 2069	<i>Τρεις όμορφες - Ανατολίτικος χορός - Κομκόν (Α. Τομπούλης)</i>	Δήμητρα Μπουρνοβαλιά & Αντώνης Νταλγκάς (vocals)	HMV	1934
OGA 156-1	151-***	AO 2220	<i>Taksim rast (Cassette #9/B Dino Pappas)</i>	Haralambos Savaidhis (kanonaki), D. Semsis "Salonikios" (violin), Agapios Tomboulis (oud), Roza Eskenazi (zilia)	HMV	17-12-1934
OGA 177-1	151-***	AO 2220	<i>Tsifte-telli (Cassette #9/B Dino Pappas)</i>	D. Salonikios with Eastern Orchestra: D. Semsis (violin), Agapios Tomboulis (oud, speech), Roza Eskenazi (speech)	HMV	04-01-1935
Go 3769		GA 7381	<i>Τα δικά σου τα σφάλματα (E. Moraitou)</i>	Roza, Dimitris Manisalis ("Ladopoulos") (violin), Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (ούτι)	ODEON	31-03-1947
Go 3768-1		GA 7381	<i>Το Gri Gri (S. Peristeris) (tsiftetelli)</i>	Roza, Dimitris Manisalis ("Ladopoulos") violin, Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (ούτι)	ODEON	31-03-1947
Go 4483		GA 7616	<i>Έλα Δημητρούλα μ' έλα</i> (on LP: Α. Τομπούλη) composed for Dimitra, Stavriana's mother ----- niot to be confused with <i>Δημητρούλα</i> by Panayotis Toundas (1935) Turkish Version : <i>Entarisi Ala Benziyor</i>	Ρόζα Εσκενάζη (Αγάπιος Τομπούλης = συνθέτης/στιχουργός. Γιώργος Ανεστόπουλος (κλαρίνο) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfu-Q_ptEaE&feature=related	ODEON (MARGO 8256)	1951
Go 4482		GA 7616	<i>Ο Μήτρος κι η Μαρίνα</i>	Ρόζα Εσκενάζη (Αγάπιος Τομπούλης = συνθέτης/στιχουργός)	ODEON	1951

Go 4688		GA 7757	Σμυρνιά (Α. Τομπούλης)	Ρόζα Εσκενάζη, Ταμπάκης & Τομπούλης (Αγάπιος Τομπούλης = συνθέτης/στιχουργός)	ODEON (MARGO 8256)	1951
Go 4687		GA 7757	Χορός Κιόρογλου (Α. Τομπούλης)	Ρόζα Εσκενάζη, Ταμπάκης & Τομπούλης (Αγάπιος Τομπούλης = συνθέτης/στιχουργός)	ODEON (MARGO 8256)	1951
N 70210	21474 (ΑΕΡ)	X-80162	Ταξίμ Χιτζαζκάρ κιούρντι (Taksim Hicazkar Kürdi)	Αγάπιος Τομπούλης	PATHÉ	1930 (MAN)
N 70211	21475 (ΑΕΡ)	X-80162	Γκελ μπαρισάλουμ (Gel barışalım)	Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals?)	PATHÉ	1930 (MAN)
N 70208	21476 (ΑΕΡ)	X-80163	Ισκεντέρ Μπογάζι (κιτσέκικο = köçek) (İskender Boğazi dardır geçilmez/ Ben yarimi gördüm)	Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals)	PATHÉ	1930 (MAN) HUST
N 70209	21477 (ΑΕΡ)	X-80163	Τανγκιέρα κάντοσου (κιτσέκικο = köçek) (Συνοδ. Λαϊκής Ορχήστρα)	Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals)	PATHÉ	1930 (MAN) HUST
N 70 ...	21564 (ΑΕΡ)	X-80223	Υεσίλ Κούρμπα (Yeşil Kurbağa)	Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals?)	PATHÉ	193.
N 70 ...	21565 (ΑΕΡ)	X-80223	Χουζάμ Γκαζέλ (Hüzzam Gazel)	Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (vocals?)	PATHÉ	193.
			Μπαμ και μπουμ μην τρως	Αγάπιος Τομπούλης (συνθέτης/στιχουργός)		
224?		224?	Η βρυσούλα η δροσερή (συνθ. Αγάπιος Τομπούλης)		LIBERTY	?
LG 1051		GA 7823	Βαρβάρα (συνθ. Αγάπιος Τομπούλης)		ODEON	1954
200?		200?	Βαρβάρα (συνθ. Αγάπιος Τομπούλης)		LIBERTY	?
Go 5200		GA 7873	Σήμερα είσαι, αύριο δεν είσαι (συνθ. Αγάπιος Τομπούλης)		ODEON	1955
LG 1079		GA 7893	Η βρυσούλα η δροσερή (συνθ. Αγάπιος Τομπούλης)		ODEON	1955
Go 5420		GA 7940	Μαριγούλα Μαριγώ (συνθ. Αγάπιος Τομπούλης)		ODEON	1957
?		GA 7914	Έχε γειά κόσμε, σ' αφήνω (συνθ. Αγάπιος Τομπούλης)		ODEON	?
?		GA 7914	Ο Τσελίγκας κι η Δημητρούλα (συνθ. Αγάπιος Τομπούλης)		ODEON	?