

# One Voice, Two Worlds

Maria Callas was once Greece's iconic vocalist; today it is Savina Yannatou, who is enchanting audiences all over the world. After 20 years of song-hunting across the Mediterranean, she returns to Thessaloniki. **Stan Rijven** finds out why her music has no borders

Even though Greece is currently enduring a period of harsh economic conditions and finds itself in the middle of a constant flow of migration, musically speaking it's precisely this migratory flow that makes it such a rich country. In geographical and historical terms it is not Athens but Thessaloniki that became the crossroads and epicentre of many cultures. According to the booklet accompanying singer Savina Yannatou's latest CD, *Songs of Thessaloniki*: 'In this crowded bazaar-city... Greeks, Jews, Turks, Bulgarians, Serbs, Armenians and Pontiac Greeks, as well as a host of Western Europeans, shared the diversity of the city's life in civil equality and religious freedom.' The album transports you back to a time when dialects and languages, traditions and customs mixed into a single multicultural laboratory. It even includes the Irish folk song 'Salonika' commemorating World War II. 'They are all there, as if in a composition of glimpses into windows of homes, of individual desires, frustrations and compromises; images on transparent slides covering each other, leaving in sight traces of all, in a contemporary sound world,' Yannatou explains.

Still, it needs her chameleonic voice and a virtuoso ensemble like Primavera en Salonico to bridge all these different musical worlds. While some of their members are from a traditional background, others have a jazzy past. Primavera en Salonico create the ideal soundscapes on *qanun*, accordion, *oud*, violin, *ney*, double bass and percussion – not by just following the leader but also improvising, bringing Yannatou's vocals to the edge.

This is evident when I see them performing live in a club on Amsterdam's waterfront, the jazz and world music venue, Bimhuis. Surrounded by a packed house, the ensemble take us on a Mediterranean trip and we immediately forget the November storms outside. The interaction between audience and performers encourages the musicians to improvise while challenging Yannatou to a dramatic delivery. At first she

simply focuses on the precise nuance needed for every song. However, during the second half, deep-felt emotion dominates her performance, resulting in calls for several encores where she displays new angles of her astonishing voice. "I felt comfortable to express the other side of myself, such free improvisations also belong to me," she tells me the next day.

Born in Athens in 1959, she began her professional career as a conservatory student when performing for the successful Greek radio-programme *Lillipoupoli* (1981), directed by the well-known composer Manos Hadjidakis. "Before the military dictatorship you heard a lot of Mikis Theodorakis and Manos Hadjidakis," Yannatou says. "These two composers were very important, and often played on radio but when the junta came to power in 1967, everything changed. Theodorakis' music was forbidden; Manos' was not because it wasn't so political. Almost the only thing being played on the radio under military rule was traditional music. I hated traditional sounds because of this. In all countries where this happened, people started to hate their traditional music."

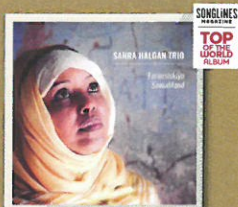
While the Greek military junta lasted from 1967-74, Franco's rule in Spain was from 1939-75, and that of Salazar in Portugal from 1926-74; after the end of those dictatorships it took two generations before flamenco and *fado* were freely able to undergo a revival in their respective countries. Yannatou remembers: "I read the books of the Czech-born writer Milan Kundera who also speaks of these things. Because of the Soviets, everything concerning tradition and language changed. For instance at school we had lengthy debates about the ancient and modern Greek language. After the military coup we had to write in old Greek. In reaction I preferred only modern music: avant-garde and pop, like Pink Floyd or Jethro Tull. Around 1991 I started to improvise, but did not plan a musical career at all." Driven from tradition and inspired by American avant-garde artist Diamanda Galás, Yannatou developed a penchant for free expression: "I was quite taken ▶





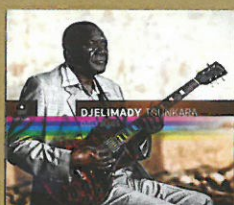


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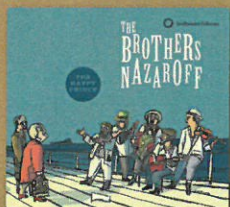
**SAHRA HALGAN TRIO**  
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Enchanting Somali singer + electric guitar & drum backing relates the sufferings & joys of her often unstable homeland. Plus documentary on DVD. Reviewed in this issue.



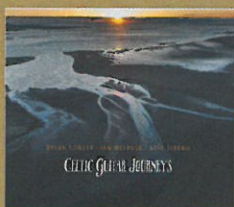
**DJELIMADY TOUNKARA**  
*Djely Blues*  
Label Bleu LBLC2603

The superb guitarist and co-founder of the Super Rail Band of Bamako, presents an eclectic instrumental album of his own compositions, with his quartet. Reviewed in this issue.



**THE BROTHERS NAZAROFF**  
*The Happy Prince*  
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Klezmer 'supergroup' pays joyous tribute to legendary Yiddish troubadour Nathan "Prince" Nazaroff, who recorded the mysterious 1954 Folkways LP 'Jewish Freilach Songs'. Reviewed in this issue.



**DYLAN FOWLER / IAN MELROSE / SOIG SIBERIL**  
*Celtic Guitar Journeys*  
Acoustic Music 31915422

three renowned finger-style guitarists from Wales, Scotland & Brittany, respectively, celebrate their varied but common Celtic music roots on this captivating album. Reviewed in this issue.



**RISERVA MOAC**  
*Babilonia*  
Bayla BAY011

3rd CD by the nine-piece, Italian folk-rock collective - with pan-Mediterranean influences, traditional & modern, and a wide array of different instruments. Reviewed in this issue.



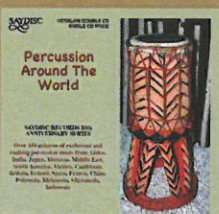
**JOE CUBA**  
*Merengue Loco / Out Of This World Cha Cha...*  
Malanga Music MM830

First 3 albums (all 1961) by the Puerto Rican/NYC conga player & bandleader, who is widely regarded as the father of "Latin Boogaloo". Reviewed in this issue.



**UNTERBIBERGER HOFMUSIK**  
*Bavaturka Vol. 11*  
Himpl Records HPS1504

Bavarian family band who combine folklore & swing with Balkan, Latin, classical styles & more, here concentrate on Turkish influences, with special guests. Reviewed in this issue.



**VARIOUS ARTISTS**  
*Percussion Around The World (2CD)*  
Saydisc CDSDL438

48-track anthology covering a vast array of percussion styles: African, Arab, Chinese, Japanese, European, Latin, Celtic, Steel Band, Indian, Pacific, etc. Reviewed in this issue.



Savina Yannatou will sing songs of Thessaloniki when she comes to London in May

when I heard Galás perform live in Athens. The frequencies she employed felt like they were penetrating your body. Listening to her records is something different, but when singing live I thought 'Oh my god, this is it.'

A few years later 'updating tradition' became Yannatou's real focus. "Initially I felt a strong resistance towards tradition but started to like it because of Montserrat Figueras, a Spanish Renaissance repertoire singer. I studied her voice when embarking on my first radio recordings and was asked to improvise in a melodic way while interpreting Figueras' *Secular Music from Christian and Jewish Spain 1450-1550* [with Jordi Savall and Ensemble Hespèrion XX]. It was this very album that made me begin to perform Sephardic and other traditional material."

Her first collaboration in 1995 with Primavera en Salonico for the album *Spring in Salonica* of Sephardic folk songs triggered her musical odyssey, exploring the Mediterranean from all corners. "Ladino is a mix of Hebrew and archaic Spanish. It's the language of Sephardic Jews that were expelled from Spain in 1492. In the diaspora they settled in the south of France, in North Africa and in the melting pot of Thessaloniki." A search for other Mediterranean tunes followed, resulting in albums of songs from Sicily to Lebanon and Morocco to Albania.

With her latest CD *Songs of Thessaloniki* (reviewed in #109) Yannatou is right back where she started but now also singing Turkish, Bulgarian, Armenian and Irish repertoire.

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## SAVINA YANNATOU



Maart Kyröharju

Her exquisite performance naturally renders each song in the original language. The sound of Yannatou's voice and that of her six-piece ensemble fit perfectly – the result of a 20-year relationship: "We met by accident and after our first recordings and concerts we decided to be a group," she says with a smile.

Even though it contradicts her traditionalist image, Yannatou's improvisations (throat singing, bird imitations) have become integral to her concerts. She also displays these qualities in other collaborations, such as that with the British avant-gardist Barry Guy: "My album with him – *Attikos* – I was totally free to improvise to my heart's content." Nevertheless, crossing too many borders can cause problems: "The difficulty is with the expectations of my audience or the record companies. It is like being two personalities." Although few people in the Bimhuis audience knew what to expect, Yannatou's sudden change from traditionalist to *avant-gardista* while performing 'La Cantiga del Fuego' was welcomed with warm applause. Just listen to 'Ah Mon Dié' on her live album, *Terra Nostra*. You'd swear to hear a neighing horse turning into a voodoo priestess, suddenly followed by a track with a devoted praying angel. "When I started singing, I only wanted to improvise but realised that it was impossible to do. Now I like doing both. I am both worlds." ♦

+ **DATE** Savina Yannatou & Primavera en Salonico perform at London's Kings Place on May 9

# ECM

Tord Gustavsen What was said Simin Tander Jarle Vespestad



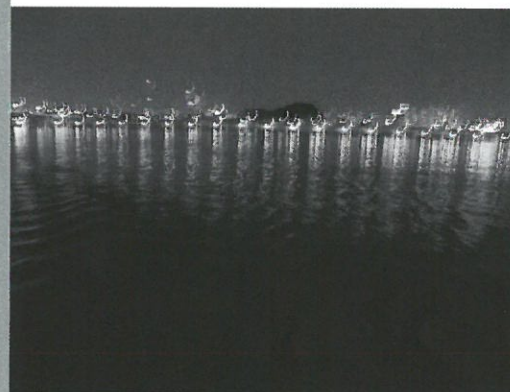
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8th – Bury St Edmunds, The Apex  
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11th – Birmingham, CBSO Centre

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Savina Yannatou Primavera en Salonico  
Songs of Thessaloniki

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Concerts in May:

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10th – Southampton, Turner Sims

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