

Chanting Education and the Cretan Syrtos: The Case of Thanasis Skordalos (1920–1998) and the Limits of the “Byzantine” Interpretation

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Abstract: - This article examines the claim that the chanting education of the Cretan lyra player and composer Thanasis Skordalos (1920–1998) shaped his idiom in the Cretan syrtos. Drawing on autobiographical testimony, local biographical sources, discographic evidence and the ethnomusicological literature on the lyra, the violin and Byzantine chant, it distinguishes four levels of evidence: (a) childhood exposure to church music; (b) an expert’s recognition of “Byzantine placements” in his playing; (c) possible structural analogies between chant and syrtos; and (d) derivation of specific syrtos from specific ecclesiastical melodies. The first two rest on sources with clear limitations; the third remains an untested hypothesis; the fourth is not documented in any source located. The claim is set against three rival accounts: the violin origin of much of the syrtos repertory, the shared modal heritage of chant and Eastern Mediterranean traditions, and the ideological history of linking folk and Byzantine music in twentieth-century Greece. A comparative analytical protocol is proposed. The article concludes that “syrtos inspired by church melodies” is at present a working hypothesis rather than an established finding, whereas the formative role of chant in Skordalos’s musical hearing is plausible and partly documented.

Key-Words: - Thanasis Skordalos, Cretan lyra, syrtos, Byzantine chant, octoechos, oral tradition, ethnomusicology

Received: March 7, 2026. Revised: June 9, 2026. Accepted: July 1, 2026. Published: October 1, 2026.

1 Introduction

Thanasis Skordalos is regarded as one of the most important lyra players of twentieth-century Cretan music. Born in 1920 in Spili, Rethymno, he recorded for more than five decades, appearing on disc for the first time in 1946 [11], [18]. Biographical and journalistic accounts of his life return consistently to one motif: as a child he stood at the church’s chanter’s stand, and chant contributed to shaping his musical character. In public discussion this motif is often strengthened into a more forceful claim, namely that many of his syrtos were “inspired” by ecclesiastical melodies.

The two formulations are not equivalent. The first concerns biography and musical education; the second concerns composition and the melodic genealogy of specific works. The first can be supported by testimony; the second requires musicological analysis which, as far as the accessible sources show, has not been published. The aims of this

article are (a) to record the available evidence critically, (b) to place it against competing interpretations from the literature on the lyra and the syrtos, and (c) to formulate a protocol by which the hypothesis could be tested.

2 Sources, method and limitations

The study draws on four categories of sources. The first is Skordalos’s own autobiographical testimony, taken from a 1992 interview with the journalist Dinos Konstantopoulos, republished on the website of the Municipality of Agios Vasilios and partly quoted in a later tribute in Rethemnos Live. The second comprises local biographical accounts, notably the address by Spili’s parish priest, Fr. Evangelos Kopanakis, on the tenth anniversary of the musician’s death, and the tribute by Kostas Vasilakis. The third is discographic evidence (the Discography of American Historical Recordings; audiovisual material published on

ekriti.gr). The fourth is the academic literature on the lyra, the syrtos, Byzantine chant and the cognitive study of musical learning.

The method is critical source reading and conceptual analysis. No transcription or acoustic analysis of recordings was carried out, and the full text of I. Kallergi's master's thesis [9] on the "First Chaniotikos Syrtos" was not accessible at the time of writing; references to it are limited to the accessible excerpts of its introduction and table of contents. The article therefore produces no musicological findings about the works themselves; it assesses what can and cannot be claimed on the existing evidence and designs a test of the hypothesis.

For clarity, the claims are separated into four levels: (E1) experiential exposure to chant; (E2) recognition of "Byzantine placements" by an expert listener; (E3) structural analogies between chant and syrtos; and (E4) derivation of specific syrtos from specific ecclesiastical melodies. The strictness of the test increases from E1 to E4.

3 The documented chanting trajectory

Skordalos was born in December 1920 in Spili. The sources give different dates for his death: 23 April 1998 on the Municipality of Agios Vasilios page and in the English-language reference entry, 22 April 1998 in the Rethemnos Live tribute. The discrepancy does not affect the conclusions, but it shows that biographical sources need cross-checking.

According to the parish priest of Spili, Skordalos was at the chanter's stand from the age of seven, helping the priest, and within five years had learned the whole octoechos without knowing musical notation [11]. This information comes from the priest's introductory narrative and not from the musician himself; the same narrative names, as his first ecclesiastical listening experience, the voice of a village chanter, Thodoris Vlachakis. In the 1992 interview Skordalos himself states that chanting helped him and that the sounds of the church that he loved played an important part in his artistic career, and adds that he himself chants. He also says that, without anyone showing him, he began to play on the lyra pieces he had heard as a child, and that he bought his lyra at the age of nine. At eleven he heard Andreas Rodinos, who, by his account, named him his successor, and at twelve he played for the first time at a wedding [18].

In sum, E1 is adequately documented as to the existence of the experience: Skordalos grew up in an environment where chant was a daily acoustic and performative practice, and he took part in it. What is not documented is which chanting repertory or

tradition (for example, a village's oral manner of chanting) he absorbed, or to what degree. The term "octoechos" refers to the eight-mode system of Byzantine chant, but to have "learned the octoechos" in practice means chiefly that he became familiar, by ear and in performance, with the melodic typologies of the modes, not that he knew their theory.

4 The Peristeris testimony: a critical reading

The most important evidence for level E2 is an episode narrated by Skordalos himself. The "musicologist Peristeris" asked him which conservatory he had attended; Skordalos replied that his conservatory was Spili, that is, his village. His interlocutor wondered whether he had a relative who was a chanter and, when Skordalos answered that he chants himself, concluded that his playing contained "placements of Byzantine music", which struck him as remarkable since Skordalos said he did not know notes. He finally described Skordalos's gift as natural talent [10] (as republished by the Municipality of Agios Vasilios).

The testimony has real value, but it needs careful reading for five reasons. First, it is retrospective: it was given in 1992 and the episode is undated. Second, the interlocutor is named only by surname; his identification with Spyridon Peristeris (1913–1998), who combined Byzantine chant with the study of folk tradition [15] and edited, among other things, a musical anthology of Greek folk songs for the Academy of Athens [16], is plausible but does not follow explicitly from the text. Third, the observation is general: it does not specify which elements, in which pieces and by what criteria were judged Byzantine. Fourth, the reasoning of the scene is inferential rather than analytical: Peristeris proposes an explanation (a chanter relative, or the musician himself) and the confirmation consists in the fact that Skordalos chants. Fifth, an expert listener's observation also reflects his own frame of reference; a specialist in chant is likely to recognise "Byzantine" features even in melodic patterns shared by several modal traditions (see Section 6).

The testimony therefore supports E2 as an indication, not as proof. It is worth noting, however, that it comes from someone experienced in both repertories, and that Skordalos himself considered it important enough to include in his account of his artistic path.

5 Syrtos and lyra: historical context and competing interpretations

5.1 The violin and the syrtos repertory

The ethnomusicologist Tullia Magrini describes the modern Cretan lyra as an instrument transformed under the influence of the violin, both organologically (tuning in fifths, no drone string, all strings available for melody) and in repertory and performance practice. According to her, the syrtos belongs to the broader violin dance repertory that the lyra had adopted by the 1920s, and its melodies have longer phrases and a wider range than older lyra dances such as the sousta [14]. Likewise, according to Panayotis League, the syrtos developed in the province of Chania, where the violin predominated, and spread to the rest of Crete in the early twentieth century [12].

This bears directly on the hypothesis. If the melodic backbone of the syrtos derives largely from traditional violin repertory, then an influence of chant on Skordalos could not be the source of the thematic material of his syrtos, but at most an element of how he elaborates it: phrase organisation, cadences, sound quality, ornamentation. The distinction between thematic origin and style of performance and elaboration is central to the formulation of the hypothesis and is not made in the often-repeated claim that the syrtos were “inspired by church melodies”.

Skordalos himself offers an interesting detail: according to League, citing a published testimony [17], Skordalos stated that before 1947 the population of Heraklion entertained itself almost exclusively with the violin rather than the lyra. Beyond the demography of listening, this reminds us that the environment in which the lyra became the dominant instrument of the syrtos was heterogeneous, and that the search for a single “source” oversimplifies the process.

5.2 The ideological dimension: Karas, the lyra and “Byzantine continuity”

The relations of folk and Byzantine music in twentieth-century Greece are not ideologically neutral. League argues that the ban on the violin in state media (1955), for which the musicologist and chanter Simon Karas is held responsible, belongs to an ethnocentric outlook that promoted the lyra as the bearer of “pure” Greek musical tradition and demoted the violin as a foreign element; moreover, according to the same study, Karas admitted late in life that the ban had been a mistake [12]. Barrett [2] explains that Karas theorised an essential relationship between Greek liturgical and folk music, and Lingas

[13] examines the process by which Byzantine chant became a “national art music” in modern Greece.

The conclusion for our hypothesis is methodological: the term “Byzantine” does not merely describe a musical resemblance; it carries historiographical weight (continuity, authenticity, identity). The scholar must distinguish description (for example, “the phrase ends in a figure analogous to a typical cadence of mode IV”) from genealogy (“the phrase derives from chant”). The former can be tested analytically; the latter requires additional evidence. It is also worth noting that Skordalos belonged to the generation of lyra players who benefited from the promotion of the lyra: in 1951 he and Kostas Mountakis sat examinations at the National Broadcasting Foundation to obtain the right to play the lyra and sing on the Armed Forces radio station [1], while, according to League [12], in a radio interview before his death he is reported to have said that Cretan music is played only on the lyra and the laouto. These data show that the narrative about the “identity” of Cretan music formed part of the artist’s environment, without implying anything about the musical origin of his works.

6 Modality: octoechos, makam and the limits of the analytical label

Cretan traditional music is modal, but the question of which modal system it belongs to remains open. Ross Daly, in the description of a seminar on the modal structures of Cretan music, states the dilemma outright: the Byzantine octoechos, the makam tradition, both, or neither? He notes that the major modal systems historically refer to urban traditions, which show similarities but also significant differences with rural traditions such as the Cretan, and that using them as an analytical tool is at once useful and potentially misleading [5].

This observation has two consequences for our question. First, the recognition of “Byzantine” elements in a lyra melody may stem from modal kinship that does not imply direct transfer, since the same or similar modal paths occur in other Eastern Mediterranean traditions. Second, even if resemblance to chant formulae is found, the alternative explanation, shared modal heritage rather than influence, must be excluded with suitable comparison corpora (see Section 11). Without this control, an observed analogy is compatible both with the influence hypothesis and with the null hypothesis.

7 Mechanisms of transmission: oral learning and implicit knowledge

If an influence exists, how could it operate in a musician who did not know notation? Research on music cognition offers a suitable conceptual framework. Bigand and Poulin-Charronnat [4] review data showing that listeners without formal musical training acquire, through exposure to an idiom, sophisticated implicit knowledge of its structure and respond to it like “experienced listeners”. That work concerns mainly Western tonal music; extending it to other modal systems is a plausible hypothesis but is not in itself evidence about Skordalos.

The framework explains how an influence could operate (long-term acoustic exposure and active performance without notation), not whether it did. Moreover, Skordalos was exposed simultaneously to many sources: earlier lyra players from Spili, Rodinos, Baxevanis, the mandolin, Fousalieris and others [11], [18]. Within a single “acoustic reservoir”, isolating the contribution of chant is methodologically difficult.

The same applies to the argument about a “vocal conception” of the lyra. Skordalos wrote and sang his own mantinades [11], and the syrτος is a form in which the melody is structurally bound to the rhyming couplet; the fit of verse and melody in the “First Chaniotikos Syrτος” is the central theme of Kallergi’s thesis [9]. The “singing” quality of the lyra may therefore arise from the nature of the syrτος and the mantinada, without requiring a chant origin. The two explanations are not mutually exclusive, but neither can be preferred over the other without analytical data.

8 Creative assimilation and the role of the dance

The sources describe Skordalos’s work as the elaboration and personalisation of material he heard. Vasilakis [18] writes that he took melodies as he heard them, perfected them and gave them his own character, opening a new path in lyra technique, which Cretan music now calls the school of Skordalos. The laouto and mandolin player Stelios Fousalieris, as quoted in the same tribute, stressed his distinctive technique and noted that he had written syrτος of his own. The remark is important: the question of creation is not limited to “transfer” from a single source; it denotes creative recomposition whose components are multiple.

In addition, the testimony of Ross Daly, as quoted in the same tribute, gives Skordalos a distinct place as a musician of the dance: good dancers honoured him for his precise rhythmic phrasing, which matched their

improvisations, and for his ability to choose the right melody for each dancer. The source describes the lyra player not as a concert artist but as the master of ceremonies of a celebration, where strict order and ecstasy coexist. If what distinguishes Skordalos in collective memory is chiefly the rhythmic and choreographic element, any interpretation that attributes his style to chant must explain how the rhythmic logic of ecclesiastical monody relates to the strict rhythmic discipline of the dance. This is not an insurmountable difficulty, but it is an additional burden of proof.

9 A test case: the “First Syrτος”

The “First Syrτος” is often chosen as a characteristic work of Skordalos. The Discography of American Historical Recordings lists a recording, “Prōtos syrτος”, by Ath. Skordalos on lyra with laouto accompaniment, dated 3 March 1951 in Athens, for Gramophone (Greece) and also issued by Victor in the United States; Skordalos is credited as composer on the basis of the disc label [6]. The entry gives a firm discographic reference point, but it does not clarify whether “composer” denotes an original composition or an arrangement of an existing melody, a common practice on labels of the period.

The issue is essential because, in the same interview, Skordalos recounts that as a child, at the feast of Saint Stylianos, Baxevanis began “the first Chaniotikos syrτος” and he followed him on the lyra [10]. If the “first Chaniotikos syrτος” described there is the same as the syrτος he later recorded, then the material pre-existed in the region’s repertory long before its discographic documentation, and Skordalos’s contribution should be sought in variation and performance. The identification does not follow from the sources, and only comparative listening can prove or refute it.

In her master’s thesis, Kallergi [9] examines the fit of words and melody in the First Chaniotikos Syrτος, with a bibliographic review, chapters on the syrτος as a tune, its relation to the mantinada and the celebration, and a section on modal elements. On the basis of the accessible excerpts it does not appear that the thesis examines ecclesiastical origin, nor can it be established from them that it analyses Skordalos’s performance specifically. It is nevertheless valuable as a methodological model and as a source for a future comparative analysis.

10 The recording with Giannis

Damarlakis

On ekriti.gr a video is published titled “Hymns of Holy Week and Encomia”, with hymns of Holy Week and the megalynaria of Good Friday (the encomia) with traditional instruments, performed by Thanasis Skordalos and Giannis Damarlakis, narrated by Giorgos Lagouvardos [7]. The page gives no recording date; since Skordalos died in 1998, the recording predates that, and its exact dating needs investigation.

The item is noteworthy because it shows that Skordalos took part in a performance of ecclesiastical repertory with instruments of the Cretan idiom. It does not, however, prove an influence of chant on his syrtos. It documents contact between the two repertories in the same person, and how that contact is manifested musically (for example, adaptation of the melody to the possibilities of the lyra) is a question for analysis. The interpretive picture of a “circle” that closes with a “return” to ecclesiastical hymnody is a literary figure rather than a finding, since the chronological order is unknown.

11 A protocol for testing the hypothesis

The table summarises the levels of claim and the degree of documentation on the evidence presented.

	Claim	Degree of documentation and main source
E 1	Skordalos was exposed to chant from childhood and himself chanted.	Strong as to the existence of the experience: autobiographical statement (1992) and priest’s account. The volume and kind of training are not specified.
E 2	An expert musicologist recognised “Byzantine placements” in his playing.	Moderate to low: one witness, retrospective and undated account, interlocutor’s identity unconfirmed, no analytical criteria.
E 3	Structural analogies (phrase, cadence, style) exist between chant and his syrtos.	Untested hypothesis: no published comparative analysis was found. Alternatives: violin origin, shared modality.

	Claim	Degree of documentation and main source
E 4	Specific syrtos derive from specific ecclesiastical melodies.	Not documented in any of the sources located.
—	Skordalos took part in a performance of Holy Week hymns with traditional instruments.	The existence of a video/recording is documented [7]; dating is unknown and it does not prove an influence on the syrtos.

To test E3 and, if indications emerge, E4, the following protocol is proposed. (a) Corpus construction: recordings by Skordalos with documented discographic data (for example, 1946–1960), distinguishing works credited to him from traditional ones. (b) Comparison corpora: recordings of syrtos by violinists, for which the database of the “Thaletas” programme (IMS-FORTH and the Department of Music Studies, University of Athens) exists; by other lyra players of the same period; and by chanters from the same geographic environment. (c) Transcription and measurement: transcription of the melodic line and measurement of features such as range, cadential tones, phrase length, melodic intervals and ornaments. (d) Blind evaluation: presenting excerpts to chant specialists and to specialists in Cretan music without information on the performer’s identity, to test whether “Byzantineness” is recognised independently of expectation. (e) Explicit rejection criteria: the hypothesis is rejected if the features attributed to chant appear with similar frequency in the comparison corpora.

12 Discussion and limitations

The analysis leads to an asymmetric picture. The strongest documentation concerns experiential exposure (E1). The Peristeris testimony (E2) is interesting but weak as proof. Structural analogies (E3) remain untested. The genealogical hypothesis (E4), which would support the claim of “inspired syrtos”, has no evidence.

The view that chant contributed to Skordalos’s musical hearing is not contradictory to the history of the syrtos: the lyra, the violin and chant are not mutually exclusive sources. What changes is the strength of the formulation. A strong formulation (“many of his syrtos derive from church melodies”) needs specific, testable examples; a weaker one (“his chanting education probably influenced his phrasing

and expressive approach”) needs comparative data on style.

The limitations of this study are as follows. First, no musical analysis was undertaken. Second, part of the sources are local and popular in character (the priest’s address, the journalistic tribute), which have value as testimony but are inherently laudatory. Third, part of the literature (for example, League’s paper and Daly’s seminar description) is unpublished or not critically published material and needs verification in published form. Fourth, the evidence on the organisation of musical education in Spili and the chanting repertoire of the village church remains unexplored; fieldwork and interviews could complement it.

13 Conclusions

The available evidence allows us to claim that Thanasis Skordalos was formed in an environment where chant was a living practice, that he himself chanted, and that he regarded the sounds of the church as important for his career. It also allows us to note that an expert musicologist, by his own account, recognised “Byzantine placements” in his playing. It does not, however, allow us to claim that specific syrtos of his derive from specific ecclesiastical melodies, nor that chant was the main musical source of his idiom. The development of the syrtos in Crete, with the central contribution of the violin, the modal kinship of traditions, and the ideological history of the term “Byzantine” in folk music constitute alternative or complementary interpretations that must be taken into account.

The hypothesis nevertheless remains research-worthy. Studying Skordalos as a musician who grew up with chant and later formed a personal style in the syrtos can be tested with the protocol of Section 11. Until then, the most accurate formulation is that chant was a documented part of Skordalos’s musical education and a possible, but unproven, factor in the formation of his style.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) utilized artificial intelligence (AI) technologies solely for the purpose of linguistic refinement and grammatical correction. Following the application of these tools, the author(s) comprehensively reviewed, verified, and edited the resulting text. The author(s) maintain full accountability and responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the publication.

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Contribution of Individual Authors to the Creation of a Scientific Article (Ghostwriting Policy)

The authors contributed in the present research, at all stages from the formulation of the problem to the final findings and solution.

Sources of Funding for Research Presented in a Scientific Article or Scientific Article Itself

No funding was received for conducting this study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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