

Article

Rebetiko and Critical Pedagogy in Greek Music Education

Zoe Dionyssiou

Department of Music Studies, Ionian University, 49100 Corfu, Greece; dionyssiou@ionio.gr

Abstract

Rebetiko, as a musical genre, has a very limited presence in Greek school music education, potentially due to its historical association with social marginalization. This paper describes the development and implementation of the educational project “A Journey to Rebetiko,” conducted by students of the Department of Music Studies at the Ionian University in six high schools in Corfu during the 2023–2024 academic year. The project, with a duration of two academic hours, featured a short musical drama performance, an open discussion between university and high school students, and a set of collaborative group music activities. The primary objective of this research was to investigate how adolescents and university students engaged with rebetiko and how the genre facilitated discussions on issues of social justice, poverty, xenophobia, and refugeeism. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the study was framed by the principles of critical pedagogy, which guided the project’s scope, the dialogue-based activities (focusing on solidarity, democracy, and active citizenship), and the collaborative group work. Data collection was based on: (a) students’ reflective diaries, (b) the researcher’s reflective journal, and (c) an analysis of original song lyrics composed by the students. The research contributes to the ongoing dialogue on whether rebetiko can offer a transformative musical experience for today’s youth and explores how critical pedagogy can foster a more relevant, inclusive, and student-centred music education.

Keywords: educational project; rebetiko; social justice; critical pedagogy; collaborative musical activities in the classroom

1. Introduction

This research explores how Rebetiko songs can be used in Greek music education, offering some new insights to young students, under the framework of Critical pedagogy. The study explores the development and implementation of the educational project “A Journey to Rebetiko,” conducted by university students to secondary school students. The literature review offers an introduction to Rebetiko, to Critical pedagogy in music education, and to Documentary theatre as it was adopted in this study.

1.1. Rebetiko Song

Rebetiko is a Greek urban traditional music genre that emerged in the late 19th century in the main Greek ports and cities, and flourished in the port of Piraeus and other ports during the early 20th century. It incorporated elements from multicultural musical traditions of Asia Minor and reflected the trauma of the Asia Minor Catastrophe.¹ Greeks, finding themselves on the western side of the Aegean Sea, were forced to rebuild their lives under conditions of poverty and social exclusion—effectively living as refugees in their own homeland. Rebetiko developed through an osmosis with many musical styles of that



Academic Editor: Luca Tateo

Received: 30 April 2026

Revised: 21 May 2026

Accepted: 8 June 2026

Published: 13 July 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

time, interacting with other music styles in the eastern Mediterranean and merged elements from Eastern modal traditions (Ottoman makam) with Western chordal harmonizations (S. T. Delegos, 2024).²

Historically, rebetiko was associated with the underworld, meaning the marginalized urban population who struggled to adapt to new living conditions. During the first half of the 20th century, the sociological profile of its musicians and followers was characterized by a defiance of established order and a protest against social inequality. Through this genre of music, they boldly expressed a personal perspective that transcended the collective experience (Holst-Warhaft, 1975; Vellou-Keil, 1978; Petropoulos, 1968/1979; Damianakos, 1975/1980).

A century later, rebetiko continues to inspire people of all ages in Greece, leading them on a musical journey into their past and their Asia Minor roots. This enduring appeal stems from a need much deeper than mere entertainment (De Nora, 2000); it serves as a vehicle for the ongoing search for cultural identity in contemporary reality. In 2017, it was recognized as part of the Unesco lists of intangible cultural heritage (United Nations Educational, n.d.).

Nevertheless, rebetiko remains unappreciated and underutilized in school music education and university curricula. This may be due to its association with marginalized social strata (Stamatis, 2016; Zaimakis, 2010) or its distance from the nation's formal musical history. Yet, rebetiko offers a significant gateway to informal music education. It provides a rich cultural and political framework for discussing the esthetic and ethnographic aspects of 20th-century Greek popular music, as well as the transition from rural to urban musical traditions (S. Delegos, 2016; Dionyssiou, 2016).

1.2. Critical Pedagogy and Music Education

The project “A Journey to Rebetiko” was inspired by the framework of Critical Pedagogy. It invited students to reflect on issues of social justice, power, and democracy as experienced in their everyday lives. Furthermore, it examined whether rebetiko can offer a transformative musical experience by providing a different perspective on these issues. Based on the writings of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, Critical Pedagogy provides a robust framework for educational actions that aim to cultivate social awareness, solidarity, active citizenship, and the motivation for social change. In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970/2000) rejected teaching as a sterile accumulation of knowledge (banking), proposing instead a pedagogy rooted in dialogue and critical reflection. Literacy was not just about reading words but about reading the world, helping students combine their lived experiences with academic learning to build new knowledge.

In Critical Pedagogy, learning is a dialogical process; students and teachers pose and solve problems together in order to broaden their perception of reality and foster empowerment. This teaching-learning process is an inherently political act, as it challenges established structures of power and control (Abrahams, 2005). Transformation occurs only when dialogue, collaboration, and reflection-action (praxis) are employed to address real-world problems. For this process to be effective, it must be based on solidarity, where facilitators and students collaborate as equals to co-create knowledge. In this environment, participants can question the status quo, develop their critical consciousness (conscientization), and recognize systemic inequalities as a first step toward overcoming them (Freire, 1970/2000). To achieve this, both students and facilitators must act collectively, bringing their own realities into the classroom to understand historical injustices and construct new meanings for the world around them (Giroux, 1997).

In the field of music pedagogy, Critical Pedagogy challenges the hegemony of Western art music and seeks to dismantle cultural stereotypes and social exclusions. Within this

framework, music serves as a vehicle for awareness, emancipation (Schmidt, 2005), and the pursuit of social justice (Jorgensen, 2015). Abrahams (2005) suggests that music education can function as a pedagogy of resistance and possibility by addressing four fundamental questions: (a) *Who am I?* (b) *Who are my students?* (c) *What can my students become?* and (d) *Who can we become together?* This approach is further enhanced when integrated into the stages of musical imagination, perception, creativity, and performance (Abrahams, 2007).

Rebetiko, like most rural and urban folk musical traditions, is a genre that has been transmitted predominantly as an oral tradition (Zaimakis, 2011). Consequently, informal learning practices—such as copying melodies from recordings, peer-to-peer learning, and improvising during live events—are the most prominent methods of transmission (Apostolis & Ververis, 2020; Wright & Kanellopoulos, 2010). Also, informal music learning practices—which prioritize discovery, recreation, and the musical process over the final product—align with Critical Pedagogy through their emphasis on collaborative dialogue, relationships, trust, and learning within a group or community (Narita & Green, 2015). Similarly, Community Music programmes offer some critical insights in connection to the topic discussed; English and Davidson (2023) highlight how a community street opera fostered solidarity, personal growth, and the construction of new meanings among participants. Daria (2018) argues that the community music model within university settings can help participants overcome inherent inequalities and build critical consciousness. Along these lines, Hess (2019) emphasizes connecting classroom practices to broader social movements, while Silverman (2022) describes music education rooted in love, care, and empowerment as a deeply relational and political act of transformation.

The work of Hess and Bradley (2020) provides a robust theoretical foundation for exploring traumatic memory and social justice in music education, specifically by applying John Dewey's concepts of educational continuity and interaction. As rebetiko embodies the traumatic collective memory of the forced resettlement of Asia Minor Greeks, as well as their subsequent struggles and marginalization in urban sites in their new homeland, it serves as a powerful vehicle for this framework. By embedding a trauma-informed pedagogical approach within a critical pedagogy framework, this project enables students to safely engage with the historical narratives of refugees and rebetiko culture. Consequently, this intersection fosters student empowerment, cultivates a deep sense of belonging, and unlocks the potential for systemic social change.

1.3. Documentary Theatre as a Canvas for the Educational Project “A Journey to Rebetiko”

Documentary Theatre, or Theatre of Fact, belongs to the broader category of the Theatre of the Real and aligns closely with Critical Pedagogy and the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1985; Govas & Zoniou, 2015). As a radical and political form of art, it seeks to cultivate active citizenship among both actors and audiences. By using primary sources—such as newspapers, interviews, and biographies—to shape its content, it fosters a dialogue with history, collective memory, and identity. Often taking the form of verbatim theatre, it prioritizes oral narration over elaborate stage action, presenting history from the perspective of the people and negotiating contemporary reality. Actors represent real individuals, revealing their authentic stories to provoke an awakening in all participants (Dafni, 2024). In educational contexts, this approach promotes political awareness and active citizenship, resonating deeply with the popular (laïko) and defiant spirit of rebetiko.

The baglamas was chosen as a protagonist and as a theatrical object or prop, because of its small size, ease of playing music and narration when someone holds it. It also has rich historical symbolism in rebetiko and a distinct sonic profile.

The formation of the educational project “A Journey to Rebetiko” was informed by the theory of Critical Pedagogy and used the technique of the Documentary Theatre in

order to develop a mini drama performance presented by the university students to the secondary school students, as will be explained below. The drama performance and the educational activities sought to explore issues of solidarity, critical awareness, and personal growth—core concepts derived from the framework of critical pedagogy, and how they were experienced by participating university and secondary school students.

2. Methodology

The aim of this research project was to explore how both adolescents and university students engaged with rebetiko through their participation in this educational programme. Furthermore, the study examined how participants perceived and discussed issues of social justice, poverty, and displacement—themes that are both central to rebetiko and present in contemporary social life. Overall, it aimed to focus on what rebetiko can offer to young people today and why it is still relevant to them.

2.1. Participant Selection and Organization

This two-hour educational intervention was implemented by the Music Pedagogy University Ensemble of the Ionian University, Department of Music Studies, consisting primarily of students specializing in music pedagogy. In total, 17 university students participated in the project, who were in the 3rd or 4th year of their music studies in the Department of Music Studies, and who chose to attend that ensemble. According to their Course Description, students need to participate in a Music Ensemble of their choice for at least four (4) semesters. They chose to attend the Music Pedagogy University Ensemble, directed by the author, which usually offers outreach projects in the community. They did not pass through any selection process; everybody was welcome. Prior knowledge of rebetiko was not a requirement. Out of the group of 17 students, there were 13 female and 4 male students. They were in their early 20s, and one male was in his 30s. Some of the group performed instruments and all the others sang. We usually had one member of the group performing the bouzouki, one performing the baglama, two performing the guitar, and the rest were singing. All contributed to the drama performance.

About half of the ensemble members had participated in the ensemble the prior year, in which they participated in a one-hour drama performance based on the same story. The educational project was a shorter version of that scenario, in the style of an educational intervention. The group received some guidance and help in drama training from Ms Evgenia Zagoura, who introduced students to the Documentary Theatre techniques.³

The development and preparation of the educational project, as well as the rehearsals of the group, took place during the first three months (October, November, December) of the winter semester of the year 2023–2024. The rehearsals took place for two hours every week, and sometimes twice a week. From mid-December to the beginning of March, six visits to secondary schools took place. The six school visits were facilitated by the university group with a slightly varying composition for each intervention.

In the secondary schools we visited, there was no selection of the participant student. All students attended if it was decided by the head and their teachers in the staff meeting.

2.2. The Development and Implementation of the Project “A Journey to Rebetiko”

The educational project “A Journey to Rebetiko” was inspired by and based on the book “A Journey to Rebetiko for Young and Adults,” co-authored by [Holst-Warhaft and Dionyssiou \(2022\)](#) and illustrated by Thanos Kosmidis. The programme was delivered across six high schools on the island of Corfu, targeting students in the 2nd and 3rd years of lower secondary education (typically aged 13–15). Notably, one of the participating sites was the Second Chance School, located within the Corfu Penitentiary Centre. In the

secondary school music curriculum, rebetiko has a very small presence. The music teachers in the six schools confirmed that their students had little contact with it, and they all found it a great opportunity for them.

The two-hour education project comprised three distinct phases with the following structure:

1. A short musical drama performance, utilizing the techniques of documentary theatre (duration 35–40 min.)
2. An interactive group discussion between university and high school students (duration 15–20 min.)
3. A collaborative musical workshop designed to foster creative engagement with the genre (duration 15–20 min.)

The music drama performance was centred on a symbolic protagonist: a small baglamas.⁴ Its story unfolds alongside the turbulent history of 20th-century Greece, starting with the Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1922, which forced 1.5 million Greek refugees to flee their homelands. The baglamas narrates the harrowing conditions of displacement—poverty, loss, war, and the daily struggle for survival—while simultaneously tracing the birth and evolution of rebetiko in the hubs of Piraeus. The instrument's first owner was uncle-Yiannis, a carpenter and amateur musician. Over the decades, the baglamas changed hands, but never ceased helping people sing their sorrows with passion and truth.

The performance featured eight characters whose narratives and biographies were combined with key historical milestones (in order of appearance):

- (a) a refugee girl from Asia Minor,
- (b) a tramp (mangas) struggling for survival,
- (c) Markos Vamvakaris,⁵
- (d) uncle-Yiannis (the carpenter),
- (e) Vasilis Tsitsanis,⁶
- (f) Sotiria Bellou,⁷
- (g) Stelios (a musician and the instrument's second owner), and
- (h) a narrator/coordinator who facilitated the dialogue with the audience.

Adopting the techniques of documentary theatre, each character delivered a two-minute monologue that integrated biographical elements, professional history, and their unique relationship with rebetiko. These monologues captured the distinct personality traits of each historical figure, which emerged through a collective study of their biographies. The script was meticulously developed by synthesizing the narrative found in the book '*A Journey to Rebetiko for Young and Adults*' with the specific historical personae presented in the performance. Consequently, the drama functioned as a lived extension of the book's historical and musical themes. Combined with the performance of specific rebetiko songs, the drama encouraged students to critically reflect on the social conditions and hardships of each era.

Between the monologues, eight rebetiko songs were performed, alongside an archival audio document—the final broadcast of the Athens Radio Station before the German occupation. These musical selections were strategically integrated into the narrative flow:

1. *Prosfygaki* [The refugee] (1928), Lyrics: M. Melkon, Music: V. Papazoglou.
2. *Oloi oi rebetes tou ntounia* [All the rebetes of the world] (1937), Lyrics/Music: M. Vamvakaris.
3. *Lachanades* [The cabbage pickpockets] (1934), Lyrics/Music: V. Papazoglou.
4. *Min apelpizesai* [Don't despair] (1948), Lyrics/Music: V. Tsitsanis. In an inclusive pedagogical move, the chorus was performed using Greek Sign Language, which the high school students were encouraged to learn and perform simultaneously.

5. *Ta kavourakia* [The little crabs] (1954), Lyrics/Music: V. Tsitsanis. This performance was enhanced through body percussion, fostering kinesthetic engagement.
6. *Giati glyko moy sweetheart?* [Why, my sweetheart?] (1949), Lyrics/Music: A. Giampouranis.
7. *Feggari, magia moy kanes* [Moon, you enchanted me] (The Foreigner) (1962), Music: M. Theodorakis, Lyrics: E. Thalassinis.
8. *Fragosyriani* [French-Syros girl] (1932), Lyrics/Music: M. Vamvakaris. The project concluded with students and pupils dancing together, transforming the performance into a collective participatory experience.

Through the above repertoire, students were exposed to various historical junctures of rebetiko—from the Smyrna style to the post-war era—while the use of sign language and body percussion reinforced the inclusive and student-centred nature of the project.

The musical drama performance was followed by an open discussion, which commenced by inviting the audience to pose a couple of questions to each character. Subsequently, a musical workshop was conducted, coordinated by the university students. The workshop activities required participants to respond to the following questions verbally or in writing on a leaflet in groups of their choice:

- (a) Which song would you take with you if you had to leave your home?
- (b) Compose a set of original lyrics based on the melody of *Fragosyriani*.
- (c) Who were the cabbage pickpockets (lahanades)?
- (d) Listen to the archival audio excerpt from the Greek Radio and identify a word or phrase that impressed you and explain why ([Historic Archive, 2024](#)).
- (e) Write a lyric blending Greek and English words, modelled after the song *Giati glyko mou sweetheart?* ([Takim Music, 2018](#))
- (f) If you were to title this journey, what would it be?

Prior to the implementation of the programme, formal approval was obtained from the principals and teaching staff of each participating school. The audience typically comprised one or two classes, with the school's music teacher and other faculty members present throughout.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The research data were gathered through a triangulation of sources: university students' reflective journals, the researcher's diary, and song lyric writing during the workshop. University students were asked to maintain personal reflective journals after each visit to a school, providing insights into their dramatic and musical performances, their impressions of the discussions with high school students, their interactions with them, and the overall atmosphere of each school visit.

Continuous reflection among the group members following each school visit was integral to the project's development. This reflective practice enabled university students to think critically, to question their pedagogical and artistic actions, and to systematically refine the musical drama performance. Through this iterative process, students deepened their research into the historical figures and rebetiko culture, eventually infusing their characters with more nuanced and personal dimensions. Those discussions or needs for improvement were reported in the university students' and the researcher's diary. In the researcher's diary, I reported the interesting discussions that took place, the school students' interest, and reactions.

Additionally, the lyrics composed by the pupils to the melody of a popular rebetiko song were reported on a paper, gathered by the researcher, and analyzed thematically. Following the completion of each school visit, a short group discussion was held to capture the students' collective experiences and help them spot what they wanted to improve in their next school visit.

All the above data—students' journals, researcher's diary, and school students' lyrics were collected and analyzed using thematic analysis. All diaries and lyrics were transcribed by the author and analyzed following a 6-step thematic analysis process: familiarization with data, initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing the report analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Based on that procedure, the following key themes emerged, which are discussed below.

3. Results

3.1. Inspiring Students About Issues of Social Justice

After the music and drama performance in each school visit in the form of documentary theatre, an open discussion with the students followed, where the students could ask up to two questions to each character, depending on what grasped their interest. Indicatively, some questions indicative of the discussions held follow.

Questions addressed to the cabbage-pickpocket: *"Why do you steal? Aren't you afraid of getting caught?"* (researcher's diary) opened up a very interesting discussion if people who steal food to survive are real criminals. The question addressed to Markos Vamvakaris: *"Why didn't you defend yourself and let the police put you in jail just because you were playing the bouzouki?"* (researcher's diary) opened up the discussion about what does the banishment of an instrument or a music tradition means and that it is impossible to stop a music tradition.

The question posed to the female singer Sotiria Bellou: *"How difficult was it to make it as a female singer?"* (researcher's diary) shows their concern about gender discrimination and the difficult living conditions for female artists at that time. Obviously, there were no easy and straightforward answers to these questions from the side of the university students group, but the discussions provoked were of great interest and they proved the general concern that existed in every school.

The above discussions showed some of the teenagers' concerns on social justice issues. The project helped them understand issues of emigration, poverty, social injustice and oppression and to reflect on similar situations existing around them today. Students understood that songs can be a way of protest against social, economic and existential problems, a powerful tool that transcends distance and time. They can also work as a way to express people's sorrows and difficulties.

"Another thing that caught my attention was that some groups were very eager and enthusiastic to speak up and respond." (univ. student diary)

"Both groups felt a mutual appreciation and support for each other, which was obvious in their behaviour, in how enthusiastically they applauded and in the clever questions they asked". (researcher's diary)

In most schools, very nice discussions were held. In half of the middle school visits, school and university students danced a song together at the end of the project, offering a nice closure to the two-hour project.

The project held with the students of the Second Chance School at the Corfu Detention Center also led to a fruitful discussion. Students of the Detention Center were impressed by how easy-going and open the university students were with them, and they felt safe to express their views of how social injustice can easily lead someone to jail (student song lyric). This topic was evident in their song lyric writing, expressing how they were offered only a few chances in their lives. So did the university students, who expressed in their reflective diaries *"very cool and easy-going performance, we had no stress at all"* (univ. student diary).

Overall, high school students enjoyed watching the university students perform and sing for them. They were truly moved and responded positively by actively participating

with applause, body percussion, singing or dancing. They were particularly motivated to attend the music and drama performance and were sincerely involved in discussions.

3.2. The Power of Storytelling

The narrative documentary theatre technique offered university students the creative freedom to interpret these characters according to their own imaginations, yielding a deeply liberating effect. Students learned extensively about the personal histories of the figures they performed—discovering a human element that they found far more compelling than the formal, academic history of *rebetiko*. Ultimately, each persona was infused with personal details from the student who embodied it, allowing the characters to evolve significantly throughout the semester.

Some extracts from student diaries highlight the climate:

“It was our first visit to a school, and it went very well for the first time. I think we need to improve our coherence, to enter faster one after the other, so that we keep a flow from one activity to the next. When we had some pauses, this was awkward and distracted the children from our activity.” (univ. student diary)

“As time went on, we gained their interest and attention, and this was especially true when the characters appeared and gave their monologues. In those moments, the students were devoted to the character who was speaking each time, without any discussion or whispering among themselves. Their attention was also evident from the questions they asked the characters afterwards.” (univ. student diary)

While the students gradually became familiar with theatrical action, additional rehearsals would have further strengthened the group’s cohesion. The brief, informal group discussions conducted after each school visit fostered continuous improvement throughout the process. Nonetheless, the performance served as a vital platform for communication, both within the group and between the performers and the audience, enabling a relaxed atmosphere for all. Although some of the university students initially experienced moments of embarrassment or lost their narrative focus, their performance improved remarkably over time, showing greater narrative coherence and heightened stage alertness. This was largely driven by the collective synergy and the evolving strength of the group.

Overall, the narrative approach employed in the performance proved to be an effective documentary theatre technique, enabling students to develop and execute a drama performance efficiently and with relative ease. This method provided a structured ‘canvas’ that enabled them to embody their roles, integrate songs into the storyline, and authentically represent the figures of *rebetiko* culture. Furthermore, since documentary theatre prioritizes storytelling over complex stage action, it was particularly beneficial for students who initially lacked the confidence for scripted dialogue or intricate scenarios. This approach allowed them to be themselves and perform with greater authenticity, while portraying a character whose biography, socio-economic background, and personal struggles had been thoroughly considered.

3.3. Lyric Writing and Participatory Action

In all participating schools, students contributed by composing original couplets to the melody of *Fragossyriani*. These lyrics were immediately performed by the university group, creating an instantaneous musical dialogue. This activity often culminated in students and facilitators dancing together, effectively dissolving the boundaries between them. As noted in a student’s reflective diary:

“The invitation to dance with the students to ‘Fragossyriani’ was a pivotal moment; it brought us remarkably close to the children. [...] We became a unified group, and afterwards, the children stayed for a long time to get to know us and discuss the themes we had presented.” (univ. student diary)

“The fact that the high school students collaborated so well in writing new song lyrics was the most exciting part of the two-hour intervention.” (univ. student diary)

Lyric writing proved to be an intuitive and accessible skill for the participants. Although a detailed linguistic analysis is beyond the scope of this article, the lyrics revealed a dynamic willingness to express students’ personal and social concerns. Two primary themes emerged: critiques of formal schooling and the exploration of unfulfilled love.

Many high school students described the school experience as an “unsolved problem,” (song lyrics), expressing boredom and frustration with their demanding daily schedules and the lack of time for outdoor activities or socialization. Simultaneously, a significant number of school students articulated feelings of unfulfilled love and a profound need for emotional connection in their song lyrics:

“Every day I wake up, I am thinking of you/and when I go to school, I think of you even more.” (high school students’ song lyrics)

“My imagination is blocked because of the love I feel for you/I would go up to Mars only to find you.” (high school students’ song lyrics)

“I would like to speak to you, but I am very shy/I stay up writing to you all night in order to find the strength to tell you I love you.” (high school students’ song lyrics)

The students at the Second Chance School in the Corfu Detention Centre were notably moved by the performance and the subsequent discussion. They appeared to identify with the marginalized figures in the rebetiko story, recognizing parallels between the historical conditions of poverty and exclusion and their own lived realities. Ultimately, these lyrics served as a poignant epitome of the issues—personal, social, and existential—that concerned the students in a prison context.

Furthermore, while most lyrics focused on personal experiences, some students directly engaged with the narrative of the drama performance. Of particular note was a student’s contribution (from the Detention Centre School) that expressed empathy for uncle-Yiannis, who allowed the tramp (Stelios) to steal the baglamas so he could make a living through music. This reflected the student’s own appreciation for social solidarity and the need for support in finding one’s way in life.

3.4. Rebetiko Learned but Not Lived?

The project revealed a complex tension between participants’ musical skill acquisition and their internalization of rebetiko’s socio-cultural essence. University students enjoyed their participation, yet viewed the project merely as another curricular requirement rather than an inspiration for independent musical exploration. They learned the songs we proposed, but they were not indulged in any further investigations in the genre. Likewise, school students participated willingly in activities and discussions, but showed no signs of deeper artistic mobilization. Moreover, while both university and high school students successfully engaged with the genre’s history and performance techniques—singing, playing instruments, and storytelling—there was a noticeable disconnect regarding the ontological dimension of the genre. I observed that while participants were moved by the individual life stories and became familiar with the repertoire, they often struggled to delve into the deeper social meanings and lived experiences that define rebetiko.

I am left with the concern that the participants (teenage and university students) may not have fully grasped rebetiko’s broader socio-historical context or its ontological

dimension. For its original creators and followers, rebetiko was a means of self-expression and a way of being in society, which led to a profound experiential relationship between the musician and the genre that integrated music, lyrics, and their lives. For the original rebetes (fans of rebetiko), the genre was not merely a musical style but a vital means of self-composition and survival; it was an experiential relationship where the condition “I sing and express myself” meant “I reconstruct my existence through those songs”.

In contrast, for today’s youth—a generation often characterized by fragmented social ties and a lack of collective musical discourse—rebetiko seemed to function more as an educational object, or mere musical genre, rather than a lived experience. This highlights a significant challenge in music education: bridging the gap between historical empathy and a profound understanding of the genre’s socio-historical reality remains a demanding task. This ontological difference was superficially touched by the participants to this project.

The provocative question “Rebetiko learned but not lived?” reminds of the difficulty to discuss and understand historical subcultures in the modern classroom, which is true both for high school and university curricula. For 21st-century young people, the marginalized reality of early rebetiko—marked by forced migration, urban poverty, and social exile—is a historical abstraction rather than a lived experience. Can a student truly embody a culture they have only met through text and recordings? By utilizing narrative documentary theatre, this project sought to transform rebetiko from a passive, detached history into an active, empathetic encounter. Through this creative process, students did not merely replicate historical artefacts; instead, they infused these distant personas with their own modern identities, transforming a performance of the past into a deeply lived, contemporary experience of belonging.

4. Discussion

The primary objective of this project was not merely the acquisition of historical knowledge regarding rebetiko, but rather the revitalization of popular song as a medium for articulating social issues and strengthening community bonds. The project sought to offer young people an alternative artistic language to express their concerns, encouraging them to compose lyrics inspired by their own lived realities and to engage with music and dance as forms of physical and emotional expression. It aimed to introduce rebetiko to young people in its deeper meaning, which empowered and gave meaning to people’s lives.

While the participating school and university students may not have experienced rebetiko with the ontological depth I had originally envisioned, they succeeded remarkably in other fundamental areas. The university students demonstrated a strong capacity for collective action; they collaborated effectively within their group and engaged meaningfully with the teenagers. By offering their best efforts to the ensemble in three roles, as musicians, educators and drama performers, they embodied the core values of solidarity and cooperation, proving that the project functioned effectively as a platform for social and interpersonal development.

Both groups of young people managed to articulate their personal and social concerns, and they understood that this expression can foster empowerment, emancipation, and the resilience to pursue one’s aspirations. They also experienced strong bonding among the group members, the ability to work collectively, and to improve their drama and music performances. Therefore, they did not experience solidarity and cooperation through rebetika songs musically and artistically, but they experienced those values in their social and interpersonal development within the group.

The interpersonal connections established between the university students and the school pupils were profoundly constructive. This initiative demonstrated that contemporary youth benefit significantly from experiential learning environments that promote social

cohesion, inspiration, and a shared commitment to communal coexistence. The engagement between different educational levels—secondary and tertiary, in this case—proved to be a mutually enriching and transformative process for all participants.

The documentary theatre narrative technique proved to be a potent pedagogical tool, offering an effective solution for a concise theatrical intervention performed by music students with limited theatrical experience. The synergy between the dramatic narrative and the musical performances facilitated deep emotional involvement from the audience. As Freire (1998) suggests, learning and emotion are inextricably linked; knowledge is most impactful when connected to a profound personal and emotional experience.

While the anticipated depth of the students' relationship with the rebetiko genre was not fully realized, it became evident that the rebetiko project described managed to serve as a powerful medium for socialization, group dynamics, and the sharing of collective musical expression. These elements contribute to the gradual empowerment of individuals within a group setting. Consequently, Critical Pedagogy operates as a framework of empathy, care, and constructive dialogue (Silverman, 2022). Modern music education is increasingly tasked with addressing collective memory and experiences, providing a secure and supportive environment that values the histories of students through collaborative practice (Hess & Bradley, 2020).

5. Limitations of the Study

The main limitation of the study relates to the broader place of rebetiko within Greek music education. The results of this project demonstrate that both university and middle school students were not genuinely captivated by the musical genre in the way I had expected. A clear gap emerged between academic knowledge and lived experience, as discussed in the section "Rebetiko learned but not lived?". Adult participants mastered historical facts and performance techniques but struggled to internalize or connect with the subversive, marginalized socio-cultural essence that characterizes the genre. However, advocating for a place for rebetiko in education remains a sensitive and contentious issue for some. It underscores the need to support young people in expressing their emotions through music, without necessarily requiring them to adopt the lifestyle or experience the marginalization associated with it.

Some practical constraints stemmed from the brief timeframe allocated for university students, which restricted their capacity to learn unfamiliar instruments and acquire a new rebetiko repertoire at large. This prevented them from developing the organic, intrinsic motivation required for independent artistic exploration. Regarding the school visits, the short duration for school students functioned only as an introductory overview. While this was sufficient to transmit core musical characteristics, songs, personal stories, and the history of rebetiko, it lacked the time needed to create a lasting, transformative experience.

Finally, as is typical with educational projects of this qualitative nature, the findings cannot be generalized, as they are closely bound to the students' musical experiences, existing familiarity with the genre, and the social citizenship skills they had already developed.

6. Conclusions

The trauma-informed pedagogical lens used in this study enabled us to shift the educational project, instead of learning about rebetiko to explore rebetiko from different perspectives and ask the students, "how does it resonate today?" This perspective requires the music educator to design a learning environment rooted in emotional safety, trust and shared respect, ensuring that historical trauma—in our case displacement, poverty, and political exile—was explored without causing trauma or alienation among students. Furthermore, by intertwining this with critical pedagogy, the project did not merely treat

rebetiko as a museum piece of past suffering. Instead, it encouraged students to critically analyze the power structures that created those historical refugee crises, drawing direct parallels to modern displacement and marginalized communities. Through collective music-making, open discussion about the drama performance, and lyric writing, students seem to transmute historical trauma into an active, contemporary dialogue about resilience, identity, and social justice.

In summary, this research examined the capacity of rebetiko to provide transformative musical experiences for adolescents and young adults. Through the collaborative nature of the project “A Journey to Rebetiko”, the classroom was transformed into a space of relational and political engagement. The project illustrated that music addressing social themes can act as a catalyst for empowerment and reflection. It also shows that collaborative musical initiatives, such as this educational project, offer significant experiences that meet the essential need for connection and artistic expression within the current educational framework.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. It did not involve newly collected data and the processing of the existing data is in accordance with the principles of the Ethics Board of the Research Committee of the Ionian University (Protocol Number 9247, date of approval: 26 May 2026).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ This is known as the 1923 exchange of population between Greece and Turkey following the end of the 1922 Greco-Turkish War, as formally agreed by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923.
- ² Some examples of Rebetika can be heard at the following links: ([Rebetiko Greece, 2020](#); [SyraRempetiko, 2012](#); [Original Gramophone Recordings, 2021](#)).
- ³ Ms. Evgenia Zagoura is an educator and actress who acted as a coordinator for the “Theater in Education” Network in Corfu for many years. We thank her for her time and valuable help.
- ⁴ Baglamas is a long-necked fretted lute, the smallest stringed instrument of the bouzouki family, with a pear-shaped speaker, a long, thin straight arm and permanent frets. It is used in folk music of Greece and neighbouring regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. It has three double strings, tuned in re-la-re, one octave higher than the bouzouki. Its body can be made of tortoise shell, gourd or a single piece of carved wood. It is one of the basic instruments in the Rebetiko music tradition. It was used when the people who played bouzouki (rebetes) were hunted down, because it was a smaller instrument and they could hide it ([Anoyanakis, 1979](#)).
- ⁵ Markos Vamvakaris (1905–1972) was a singer, composer, lyricist and instrumentalist. He was born in Syros in a Catholic family, the first of six children. He came from Syros to Piraeus at the age of twelve, worked many jobs to manage his living. At the age of nineteen he became one of the best self-taught bouzouki players in Greece. He is considered the greatest shaper and performer of Piraeus rebetiko. In 1933 he recorded his songs for the first time and the following year he created the first music group in Rebetiko, “Tetras of Piraeus”. With his musical talent and strong personality, the famous Tetras of Piraeus succeeded in combining the Smyrna style with the local element, thus creating the Piraeus rebetiko.
- ⁶ Vasilis Tsitsanis (1915–1984) was born in Trikala. He started playing music with a mandolin that he transformed into a bouzouki. In 1936 he went to Athens to study law, but he got a job in a nightclub and within a year he recorded his first song. When rebetiko was banned by the Metaxas dictatorship as marginal songs, Tsitsanis followed the demands of censorship and began writing songs for a wider audience, grafting rebetiko with Western elements. During the years of the German troops Occupation, he maintained his own shop in Thessaloniki and after the Civil War he returned to Athens, now recognized as the representative voice of popular song in the country. He never stopped performing on stage and writing new songs almost until his death,

leaving a great body of work behind him. He rejected the underworld environment of rebetiko, which some interpreted as a transition from rebetiko to folk, while others accused him of showing a lack of respect for the people of rebetiko.

- 7 Sotiria Bellou (1921–1997) was born in Chalkida, she decided to become a singer at the age of seventeen, she had an unhappy marriage, and was imprisoned. She collaborated with many composers of the time, but her collaboration with Vasilis Tsitsanis established her as one of the most important singers of post-war rebetiko. Bellou remained faithful to the old style of rebetiko. She died poor at the age of seventy-six in Athens.

References

- Abrahams, F. (2005). The application of critical pedagogy to music teaching and learning. *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 6, 6. Available online: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme/vol6/iss1/6> (accessed on 1 October 2025).
- Abrahams, F. (2007). Critical pedagogy for music education: A best practice to prepare future music educators. *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 7, 5. Available online: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme/vol7/iss1/5> (accessed on 1 October 2025).
- Anoyanakis, F. (1979). *Greek popular musical instruments* (C. N. W. Klint, Trans.). National Bank of Greece.
- Apostolis, A., & Ververis, A. (2020). Folk musicians in the position of teacher: The case of a Santouri player and teacher in Greece. *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 36, 9. Available online: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme/vol36/iss1/9> (accessed on 1 October 2024).
- Boal, A. (1985). *Theatre of the oppressed*. Theatre Communications Group.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77–101. [CrossRef]
- Dafni, R. (2024). Documentary theatre as a means of cultivating and strengthening citizenship among adult students in the school of 18 Ano addiction rehabilitation unit. *Education & Theatre*, 25, 24–35. [CrossRef]
- Damianakos, S. (1980). *Koinoniologia tou rebetikou* [Sociology of Rebetiko]. Plethron. (Original work published 1975)
- Daria, J. (2018). Community music on campus: Collaborative research, activist methods and critical pedagogy in a fandango-based participatory music programme. *International Journal of Community Music*, 11(1), 91–108. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Delegos, S. (2016). An educational approach in urban Greek popular music. In M. Kokkidou, & Z. Dionyssiou (Eds.), *Music literacy: Formal and informal ways of music teaching-learning (Proceedings of the 7th international conference of the Greek society for music education)* (pp. 164–175). GSME.
- Delegos, S. T. (2024). A modal heterotopia: Rethinking Makam modality and chordal harmony in interwar rebetiko. *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 56(2), 81–104. [CrossRef]
- De Nora, T. (2000). *Music in everyday life*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dionyssiou, Z. (2016). Basic concepts of orality in traditional or folk music: Traditional music and intercultural approaches in music education. In M. Kokkidou, & Z. Dionyssiou (Eds.), *Music literacy: Formal and informal ways of music teaching-learning (Proceedings of the 7th international conference of the Greek society for music education)* (pp. 176–185). GSME.
- English, H. J., & Davidson, J. W. (2023). Adela and transformative learning: A Freirean perspective on a community music education project in Melbourne, Australia. *International Journal of Music Education*, 41(4), 571–584. [CrossRef]
- Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as cultural workers*. Westview Press.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Academic. (Original work published 1970)
- Giroux, H. A. (1997). *Pedagogy and the politics of hope: Theory, culture, and schooling. A critical reader*. West View Press.
- Govas, N., & Zoniou, C. (2015). Ta theatropaidagogika programmata kai oi technikes tou Theatrou-Forum [Drama-in-education programs and Forum Theatre techniques]. *Ekpaidefsi kai Theatro* [Education and Theatre], 16, 94–97.
- Hess, J. (2019). *Music education for social change: Constructing an activist music education*. Routledge.
- Hess, J., & Bradley, D. (2020). Dewey's theory of experience, traumatic memory, and music education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 39(4), 429–446. [CrossRef]
- Historic Archive. (2024, June 10). The last announcement of the Athens radio station before the entry of the Germans in Athens (27/04/1941), audio document. *YouTube*. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjhmaXrEWKU> (accessed on 1 November 2024).
- Holst-Warhaft, G. (1975). *Road to Rembetika: Music from a Greek underworld*. Denise Harvey.
- Holst-Warhaft, G., & Dionyssiou, Z. (2022). *A journey to rebetiko for young and adults* [Taxidi sto rebetiko gia mikrous kai megalous] (T. Kosmidis, Illus.). Fagottobooks.
- Jorgensen, E. R. (2015). Intersecting social justices and music education. In C. Benedict, P. Schmidt, G. Spruce, & P. Woodford (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of music education and social justice* (pp. 7–28). Oxford University Press.
- Narita, F. M., & Green, L. (2015). Informal learning as a catalyst for social justice in music. In C. Benedict, P. Schmidt, G. Spruce, & P. Woodford (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of music education and social justice* (pp. 302–317). Oxford University Press.
- Original Gramophone Recordings. (2021, March 26). *Prin to harama/Od. Moschonas—St. Perpiniadis 1948* | *Prin to harama/Od. Moschonas—St. Perpiniadis*. *YouTube*. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNarzM-nzUc> (accessed on 1 April 2026).
- Petropoulos, E. (1979). *Rebetika tragoudia* [Rebetika songs]. Kedros. (Original work published 1968)

- Rebetiko Greece. (2020, March 15). Markos vamvakaris—Ta matoklada sou lampoun (1936). *YouTube*. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJeB6zAsKx0> (accessed on 1 April 2026).
- Schmidt, P. (2005). Music education as transformative practice: Creating new frameworks for learning music through a Freirian perspective. *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 6(2). Available online: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme/vol6/iss1/2> (accessed on 1 October 2025).
- Silverman, M. (2022). Critical pedagogy as a pedagogy of “love”. *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 40, 8. Available online: <https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/vrme/vol40/iss1/8> (accessed on 1 November 2025).
- Stamatis, Y. (2016). Rebetika and catharsis: Cultural practice as crisis management. *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, 15(3). [CrossRef]
- SyraRempetiko. (2012, November 4). Vasilis tsitsanis—Acharisti (1947). *YouTube*. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JD6aRnEkAkM> (accessed on 1 April 2026).
- Takim Music. (2018, March 2). TAKIM-Γιατί Γλυκό Μου sweetheart? [OFFICIAL VIDEO]. *YouTube*. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cxpstVjnpzU> (accessed on 1 November 2024).
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (n.d.). *Rebetiko*. Available online: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/rebetiko-01291> (accessed on 1 April 2026).
- Vellou-Keil, A. (1978). *Markos vamvakaris: Autobiografia* [Markos Vamvakaris: Autobiography]. Papazisi.
- Wright, R., & Kanellopoulos, P. (2010). Informal music learning, improvisation and teacher education. *British Journal of Music Education*, 27(1), 71–87. [CrossRef]
- Zaimakis, Y. (2010). ‘Forbidden fruits’ and the communist paradise: Marxist thinking on Greekness and class in rebetika. *Music and Politics*, 4(1). [CrossRef]
- Zaimakis, Y. (2011). Music-making in the social world of a Cretan town (Heraklion 1900–1960): A contribution to the study of non-commercial rebetiko. *Popular Music*, 30(1), 1–24. [CrossRef]

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.