

ELEFThERIA ARVANITAKI

Goddess of music adored around the world

Eleftheria Arvanitaki has revitalised a traditional style, writes *Kelsey Munro*.

IN GREECE, she is a megastar, a modern goddess. Eleftheria Arvanitaki is a singer celebrated for the clarity and expressiveness of her voice, and – by those who speak Greek – the poetry of her music.

Her songs have become contemporary Greek classics. Every solo album she has released in the country since the mid '80s has gone platinum. She has sung at the invitation of the Pope in Rome.

She was the only Greek singer to perform a work by Philip Glass, commissioned for the 2004 Athens Olympics closing ceremony. (That production, Orion, also visited Melbourne.) Yet while she is signed to the famous American jazz label Verve, she is little known outside the Greek diaspora and dedicated world music circles.

With lustrous black hair, looking like an elegant Greek P.J. Harvey, Arvanitaki has had an enduring love affair with the Greek public. Judging by her

sales, she's never released an album they didn't like. She laughs. "No, it doesn't sound like it."

Occasionally turning away from the phone to ask someone for an English word, she says: "Sometimes an album is more personal, more – how do you say? – esoteric, and not so popular. Do you understand? But still there's a lot of people who like it."

Perhaps keen to dodge stereotypes of smashing plates and Zorba the Greek dances, she points out that there is no such thing, strictly speaking, as "Greek music", even though she is considered an ambassador for it.

"We have different music in the mountains, in the cities, different music in the islands, between the islands," she says.

But an openness to other cultures does characterise the country's music.

"Greece is between east and west, so it is very open-minded in the music way, let's say," says Arvanitaki.

Rembetika was the music of the Greek urban poor in the '20s and '30s, invented in the communities of nearly

1.5 million refugees from Asia Minor who settled in Greek cities after the Greco-Turkish War in 1922.

"They had to express all the poverty and hunger and the hardship they had in their new life," Arvanitaki says. "It's love songs and highway living songs, drug songs, and social songs, not political songs."

"But through these songs you can understand what the community had gone through and a little bit of the political situation of the time."

Rembetika disappeared from the radio for decades, Arvanitaki says, during the years of dictatorship and civil war that followed. "Then in the late '70s, through intellectual people here, through the universities, we discovered this kind of music," she says.

The music struck her, and she became "very fanatic" about it. "It was like blues, it was like rock'n'roll, you know?" she says with a laugh.

Her first band, Opisthodromiki Kompania, helped revive interest in rembetika and Greek folk music from 1980 to 1985, when she quit to go solo.



Arvanitaki's music since has embraced genres as diverse as Spanish rhythms and jazz; and combined innovation and tradition in collaborations with renowned world music acts including Dulce Pontes (Portugal), Amaraal (Spain) and Ismael Lo (Senegal).

Now in her early 50s, the ageless Arvanitaki still tours constantly.

"Oh, I like touring, I like live performances," she says. "I mean, for the musicians and the singers it's the point, you understand? Of course, the studio is a very creative period – but making shows and gigs is what original singers and musicians do."

Eleftheria Arvanitaki performs at the Arts Centre on May 24 at 5pm.

Article from *The Age*

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