

Karpathian Sousta: Emotional and Social Significance

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Overview

The ancient Greeks viewed dancing as a way to worship the gods and as a way to combine rhythm, poetry, grace, endurance, and socializing. Men and women who could dance with grace (and for a long time) were, and still are, praised.

Far from being a “sissy” activity, Greek men who can dance well are considered quite manly by both men and women. Some Greek dances involve a lot of jumping, twisting, and turning that require considerable physical endurance. Indeed, some Greek dances resemble marathons in that they can last for hours.

In ancient Greece, all men learned to dance. During the Turkish occupation of Greece (1453-1821), Greek guerilla warriors used dancing as a military form of exercise and training. The jumping and leaping involved in certain Greek dances helped to prepare warriors for running and fighting on Greece’s rocky and mountainous terrain. The songs accompanying these dances often express the feelings of the soldiers: their homesickness, love of country and family, their sadness, and the joy they anticipated upon return to their loved ones.

In most Greek folk dances, dancers clasp hands and dance in a circle, symbolizing their wholeness as a unit. Yet the person leading the circle dance can exercise their prerogative to engage in as many individual and intricate movements as they wish.

Leaders can even stop the entire line from moving forward in order to perform their unique dancing steps (*scherza*). Meanwhile the other dancers encourage the leader’s spontaneous, creative movements by clapping, singing, or voicing congratulations such as *Yia Sou* (To your health), *Bravo*, or *Opa* (Keep on going).

The Karpathian Sousta and Zervgos

There are hundreds of Greek folk dances. Some are regional in that they originated in a certain part of Greece and are related to the history of that region. One example is the sousta dance of Crete and other islands, such as Karpathos.

Sousta means “spring,” referring to the bouncing movements of the dancers.

Some believe that the *sousta* was originally a Greek pyrrhic danced in full armor for military training purposes. E.g., Spartan warriors learned to dance so they could be in step with the movements of their comrades. Today the *sousta* is danced in the Balkans, Cyprus, Crete, and other islands as either (a) a courtship dance or (b) a line of dancers.

Almost every Aegean island has its own *sousta* dance. But the dancers are always linked by crossed arms; and the dance always involves a lyre, mandolin or violin, and/or a laouto and/or a bagpipe.

Since the *sousta* involves moving right, then left, then right again, left again, etc., it's been likened to the back and forth motion of the waves of the ocean.

On the island of Karpathos, the Karpathian *sousta* is the main dance. Traditionally it's preceded by a warm up similar to the Cretan *tsiagnio* or the uniquely Karpathian *zervgos*.

The *zervgos* is basically a backwards *sousta* danced slowly as a warm up. Sometimes, however, it's danced fast as a variation of the basic Karpathian *sousta*.

Mandinathes

During parts of the warm-up or slow *zervgos*, traditionally the musicians and/or dancers sing poems called *mandinathes*. *Mandinathes* are two lines of rhymed poems about one's feelings about one's self, another person (dead or alive), life, human nature, Karpathos, the specific event being celebrated, a political or historical event and, most recently, about changing times, computers, etc.

At weddings, traditionally the bride's side of the family forms one dance line; and the groom's, another line. As the two lines face each other and dance a slow *zervgo*, persons from both lines sing wishes to one another, grieve for those not present due to death or migration; bring up past grievances towards someone in the other line, then vow to set aside their grudges for the sake of the new couple. Since these words of forgiveness are made publically, they have extra power.