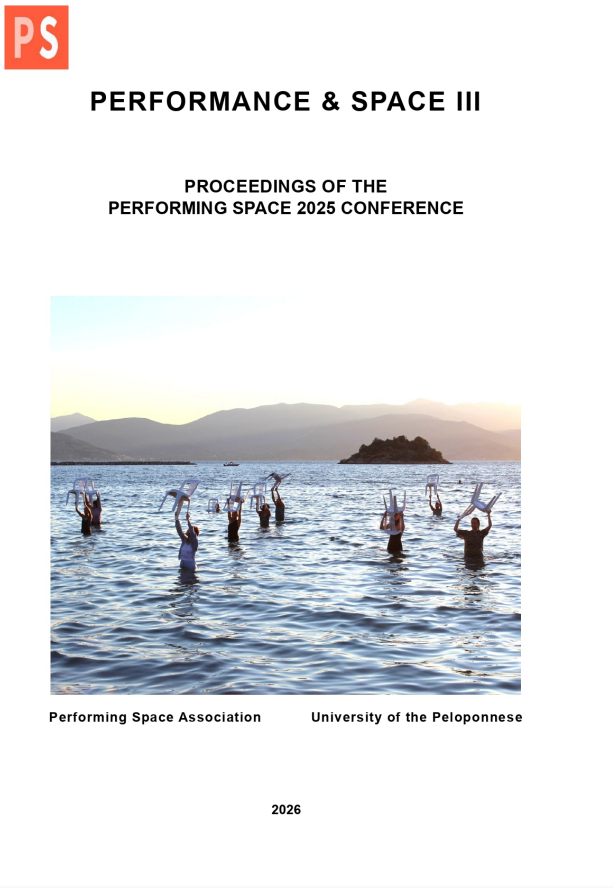
PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

(2026)

PERFORMANCE & SPACE III. PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2025 CONFERENCE



Changing Spaces, Changing Music Ecosystems: What We've Learned so far in Greece

Vasiliki Sirakouli

doi: 10.12681/ps2023.9969

32

Changing Spaces, Changing Music Ecosystems: What We've Learned so far in Greece

Vasiliki Sirakouli
Athena Research Centre

Abstract

Georgina Born has emphasised music is always mediated by space — whether physical, social, or virtual — and understanding music requires attention to these spatial dimensions. She also highlights the relative underdevelopment of analytical approaches to the social dimensions of the interweaving of music, sound, and space. During the last two decades many changes have taken place in the spaces used for music performance in Athens and other cities, especially through festivals. Even though "space" and "performance" are two quite popular terms that have risen in Greece — after decades the same had happened at the States —, there is surprisingly little research focused on how different music genres engage with and utilise space in the country. While ethnomusicological studies have explored traditional musics within specific regional or ritual contexts, there is a notable gap when it comes to examining how urban jazz and classical music genres interact with physical and social spaces. Issues like spatial politics and genre-specific uses of public, private or alternative spaces remain underexplored, leaving a significant area of cultural practice undocumented and analytically neglected. This paper, by examining different music genres, investigates how music performance and space navigate urban and rural environments, venue infrastructures, and informal or alternative performance spaces. Through personal fieldwork, discussions, spatial analysis, and reflexive theoretical approaches, I intend to uncover the ways in which space shapes musical genres and vice versa, filling a critical gap in the understanding of Greece's diverse and evolving musical landscapes.

Keywords: space, classical music, jazz music, festivalisation, Greece

Changing Spaces, Changing Music Ecosystems

Georgina Born has argued that music “is never free-floating but takes place: it takes place in and across heterogeneous spaces that are both social and temporal” (Born, 2013, p. 10). In doing so, she shifts the analytical focus from viewing music as an autonomous aesthetic form to understanding it as a practice fundamentally embedded in institutions, technologies, and publics. Her ethnography of IRCAM demonstrates how the architecture, bureaucracy, and technological systems of the institute actively shaped the kinds of avant-garde works it produced, highlighting music as “a field of power relations, professional hierarchies, and cultural capital” (Born, 1995, p. 7). From this perspective, space does not simply host music but participates in its very constitution, making spatiality integral to musical production and reception.

Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991) provides a strong theoretical foundation for examining these interconnections. Lefebvre famously claimed that “social space is a social product” (p. 26), generated through the dialectical interplay of spatial practices — the material routines and uses of space — representations of space, the conceptual and institutional orderings of space, and representational spaces, the lived and symbolic dimensions of space (pp. 38–39). This triadic framework clarifies how music contributes to the continual production of space. As practice, it occupies and organises environments; as representation, it is codified in institutions and genres; and as representational space, it evokes symbolic and lived meanings for audiences. As Lefebvre notes, “Every society — and hence every mode of production — produces a space, its own space” (1991, p. 31), and musical genres are no exception.

Space: The Active Agent of Music

Bringing Born and Lefebvre into conversation makes clear how closely their ideas resonate, both emphasise that music can sustain existing spatial orders while also opening the possibility of challenging them. Genres, in this sense, operate as spatial practices that articulate relations of power and belonging. Hip-hop, for instance, emerged from marginalised neighbourhoods, transforming neglected urban landscapes into dynamic cultural zones. The opera house, by contrast, demonstrates how architecture and acoustics can stabilise social hierarchies and reaffirm elite authority. As Lefebvre (1991, p. 88) notes, space is always a “contradictory unity” — shaped by structures of power yet also a site of contestation and reinvention. Music, then, is never just situated in space; it participates in producing and reshaping it.

At the same time, the relationship between music and space can be seen from the opposite direction. Space itself can be understood as an active agent - almost a “manager”

— in shaping what kinds of music are possible. The resonant acoustics of a cathedral, for example, produce liturgical soundscapes that could not exist in drier environments. In contrast, urban zoning laws and noise restrictions limit where popular music can circulate, while the algorithmic structures of digital platforms govern how audiences discover and engage with sound. As Lefebvre notes in *Rhythmanalysis*, rhythms “always imply a relation of space and time” (2004, p. 15), reminding us that spatial conditions inevitably leave their mark on musical form. Born echoes this insight in arguing that “music is a medium of sociality and temporality” (2013, p. 12).

Looking through the lens of genre makes these dynamics particularly visible. As Born points out, genres are “social formations” that “mediate and transform relations between publics, institutions and technologies” (2013, p. 25). They carry with them not only sonic conventions but also spatial and institutional ones. In Greece, for example, jazz and classical music are frequently perceived as foreign or elite, distinguished from vernacular and popular musics by the kinds of venues they occupy, the audiences they attract, and the symbolic value they carry. This pattern reflects Lefebvre's observation in *The Urban Revolution* that cultural practices are unevenly distributed across urban space, reinforcing and reproducing social hierarchies (2003, p. 17).

The interplay of genre and space has been explored in various contexts, though less so in Greece. Scholars have examined hip-hop's territorial claims in urban neighbourhoods (Forman, 2002), the opera house as a locus of elite cultural authority (McAuley, 2000), and the role of festivals in reshaping cultural geographies (Gibson & Connell, 2011). Yet in Greece, despite a rich tradition of ethnomusicology, urban genres such as jazz and classical remain underexplored in terms of their spatial politics. This gap is particularly striking given the recent proliferation of festivals and alternative venues, which highlight the dynamic interaction between genre and space.

Musics, Genres and Space in Greece

In recent years, both jazz and classical music in Greece have found their way into non-traditional venues such as cafés, clubs, bookshops, improvised galleries, factories, ports, archaeological sites, and public squares. Performing in these settings unsettles long-standing associations between genre and space, opening up unexpected encounters between musical traditions and new audiences. To borrow Lefebvre's phrase, such events illustrate space as “a network of relations continually in the process of being made and remade” (1991, p. 86). What is at stake here is not simply the relocation of genres to different sites, but a deeper transformation of the socio-symbolic landscape of Greek musical life, where space itself plays an active role in reshaping how these traditions are received and reimagined.

Classical music in Greece has long been associated with elite institutions and venues such as the Athens Concert Hall (Megaron Mousikis). The architecture and acoustics of the Megaron exemplify Lefebvre's category of representations of space: designed to embody cultural prestige, the building imposes a spatial order that frames classical music as a high-cultural practice. Audiences are socially stratified, often reflecting middle and upper-class demographics. However, in recent years, classical performances have increasingly appeared in alternative spaces: public squares, community centres, and even industrial sites repurposed as cultural venues. Initiatives like the *Athens Epidaurus Festival* have staged open-air performances — like the one where the famous cellist Yo Yo Ma appeared at Kipseli Square — disrupting traditional associations of classical music with elite spaces. These shifts illustrate Born's claim that music is mediated by changing institutional and social contexts, while also demonstrating Lefebvre's notion that representational spaces can destabilize established orders.

The *Athens Epidaurus Festival* has long been a central part of Greece's cultural life, best known for its unforgettable evenings in the ancient theatres of Epidaurus and the Odeon of Herodes Atticus. In recent decades, though, the festival has taken an important new turn with the addition of Pireos 260, a former warehouse complex on Pireos Street. Once part of Athens' industrial backbone, the site has been reinvented as a lively cultural hub where theatre, dance, and music all find a home. Today, its vast halls regularly host jazz ensembles and chamber groups, offering audiences a fresh way of experiencing these genres — one that carries with it the raw textures and urban memory of the city's industrial past.

Performances here illustrate Born's concept of “heterogeneous spaces,” where institutional, symbolic, and lived dimensions intersect (2013). The cavernous halls and industrial architecture shape the acoustic and aesthetic experience of concerts, contrasting starkly with the controlled acoustics of the Megaron Moussikis. At the same time, the site carries connotations of labour, modernisation, and urban memory. When jazz or classical music resonates within these walls, the genre acquires new associations: cosmopolitan, experimental, and intertwined with Athens' shifting urban fabric. In Lefebvre's terms, Pireos 260 is not just a backdrop but an active force in producing new spatial practices and representational spaces that alter the meaning of the music itself.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports launched the *All Greece One Culture* initiative, an ambitious project designed to disperse performances across archaeological sites, castles, monasteries, and town squares throughout the country. Classical ensembles and jazz trios featured prominently in the program, staged against backdrops ranging from Byzantine monuments to ancient ruins.

This initiative democratised access to genres that are often perceived as distant or unknown. By moving beyond Athens and Thessaloniki into rural and regional locations, the

project created opportunities for audiences who might never attend a concert hall to experience jazz and classical music in familiar, symbolically rich settings. A quartet performing in a medieval fortress or a jazz trio at an archaeological site recontextualises both the music and the space. The music highlights the cultural depth of the site, while the site imbues the performance with historical resonance. As Lefebvre insists, “every society produces a space, its own space” (1991, p. 31), and here the Greek state explicitly mobilised heritage sites as stages for re-producing space through music.

The symbolic effect is double: these concerts frame jazz and classical as part of Greece’s contemporary cultural identity, not as external imports, while also re-inscribing heritage sites as living spaces of artistic creation rather than static monuments. In this sense, the project exemplifies how music and space co-produce cultural meaning, reinforcing Born's call to examine the mediations between genres, institutions, and publics.

Moving to the island of Lesvos, we meet the Molyvos International Music Festival situating classical performance within the dramatic setting of a medieval castle overlooking the Aegean. Since its establishment, the festival has brought international soloists and chamber ensembles to the small town of Molyvos, combining cosmopolitan artistic practice with local cultural life. This festival exemplifies how rural and peripheral spaces can transform the reception of genre. Classical music, usually tied to metropolitan centres, here becomes part of the rhythms of island life. For local audiences, the festival offers access to high-level international performance without requiring travel to Athens or abroad. For visiting musicians and listeners, it provides a unique encounter with Greece's cultural and natural landscapes.

The festival popularises the genre by embedding it in familiar surroundings, while for visitors it creates a unique cultural experience that blends cosmopolitan artistry with local identity. Here, festivalisation democratises and spectacularises at the same time: it makes classical music accessible in a rural context while also framing it as a special, almost exclusive event. This tension reflects Lefebvre’s idea of space as inherently paradoxical — structured by power relations, yet continually open to challenge and redefinition.

Taken together, these examples show how festivalisation and popularisation are central to understanding the spatial politics of music in Greece. Festivals reshape how spaces are used and remembered, while popularisation unsettles traditional hierarchies by bringing classical and jazz to new audiences and new places. Both processes highlight the double role of space: it functions not as a passive backdrop but as an active force that helps decide how genres circulate, who has access to them, and how they are valued in the broader cultural landscape.

The cases of Pireos 260, *All Greece One Culture*, and the Molyvos International Music Festival showcase not only how music interacts with space, but also how cultural life

in Greece has been reshaped by festivalisation. Over the last two decades, festivals have multiplied across Europe and Greece, becoming key organisers of how music is programmed, circulated, and experienced. Alongside festivalisation, popularisation plays a crucial role in how classical, and jazz have been repositioned in Greece. These genres gain new audiences when performed in public squares, archaeological sites, or small-town castles. The Ministry of Culture's *All Greece One Culture* initiative, for example, deliberately placed performances in symbolic locations where people might not otherwise encounter jazz or classical music. When a jazz trio plays in a monastery courtyard or a string quartet in a fortress, the setting itself reframes the music: it becomes not only accessible, but also tied to a shared cultural heritage. In Lefebvre's terms, these are representational spaces — places charged with lived and symbolic meaning — where music and space together produce new experiences of belonging.

Festivalisation also reinforces Born's reminder that music is always embedded in institutions, publics, and technologies. Festivals act as powerful institutions in their own right: they decide who performs, how genres are represented, and which spaces are activated. By presenting jazz and classical music within large-scale cultural projects, festivals boost the visibility of these genres, but also subject them to the logic of festival culture - branding, spectacle, and the creation of temporary cultural "moments." Popularisation broadens the audience base, making these musics part of everyday cultural life, but the reliance on festivals raises questions: *does this openness last beyond the event, or does it remain tied to the exceptional atmosphere of the festival?*

Conclusion

In conclusion, looking at jazz and classical music in Greece through Born and Lefebvre shows how closely space and music are tied together. Music does not just happen in space; it helps to create it, shaping meanings, hierarchies, and experiences of belonging. At the same time, spaces — whether concert halls, factories, squares, or castles — shape what kinds of music are possible and how they are received. The examples of Pireos 260, *All Greece One Culture*, and the Molivos International Music Festival show how festivalisation and popularisation have reshaped these genres, by challenging established connections and extending them to new audiences. They remind us that in contemporary Greece, the politics of space are at the core of how music is made, shared, and valued.

References

Born, G. (1995). *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde*. University of California Press.

Born, G. (2013). *Music, Sound and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience*. Cambridge University Press.

Forman, M. (2002). *The 'Hood' Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*. Wesleyan University Press.

Gibson, C., & Connell, J. (2011). *Festival Places: Revitalising Rural Australia*. Channel View.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space*. (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Blackwell.

Lefebvre, H. (2003). *The Urban Revolution*. (R. Bononno, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.

Lefebvre, H. (2004). *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. (S. Elden & G. Moore, Trans.). Continuum.

McAuley, G. (2000). *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*. University of Michigan Press.