

# Sirtaki: Rebetiko, Swing & the Four Dotted Quarters

## Music Theory Essay

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**Hasapiko** (Χασάπικο) is the most simple rhythm pattern in the world, consisting of low-high, or kick-snare. It has the simplest time signature - 2/4, known as "dvoyka" (2) in Macedonian, "kolo" in Serbian and "Polka" in many parts of the world.

Usually, for practical reasons, today it's notated in 4/4, rather than in 2/4 (low-high-low-high)

In the first half of the 20th century, in Greek Rebetiko music, Hasapiko songs would be composed using eighth notes. A great example is the song [Fragosyriani by Markos Vamvakaris](#), composed in 1935.

If you listen to the original recording performed by the author, you'll notice the rhythmic patterns of eighth and quarter notes in the melody.

But if you listen to a recording by the same author of the same song in the 60s ([here](#) and [here](#)), you'll hear that he is now playing and singing the same melody in triplets, while the rhythm section (guitar, bass, percussion) are still in quarter notes.

### **What happened?**

My understanding is that Jazz entered Greece in the 50's through the radio and US jazz ensembles touring Greece. This profoundly changed the way that Rebetiko musicians started composing and performing. Described as bouzouki "*jazz-influenced phrasing*" or "*swing-like ornaments*", the truth is that bouzouki players started thinking in triplets.

Some musicians, like Manolis Hiotis (Μανώλης Χιώτης) even changed the way the rhythm section works. His song [To Hrima Den To Logariazo](#) (Το Χρήμα Δεν Το Λογαριάζω) has abandoned the Hasapiko, and it's a proper bluesy, swing song, rhythmically speaking. Listen to the walking bass line in that song.

But most of the other bouzouki players and composers, kept the steady 4/4 beat, while still composing or performing the melodies in triplets.

But then the question arose - which was bothering me since youth - **how can I notate these compositions?**

One way to do it is to notate them in **12/8**. But this time signature implies very strong triplets, as well as a rhythm section that follows in the same fashion. The above-mentioned To Hrima Den To Logariazo, fits in this time signature naturally. This is the time signature of Blues and European folk, where the rhythm section is triplet-y.

But the rhythm section of Greek songs with triplets in the melody, has a very steady feel, as if almost playing in 4/4 time.

Notating it in steady 4/4 time with **triplets** will produce a lot of visual noise for relatively simple songs.

Another possibility is to add the "**Swing Ratio Marking**" (note-equals-triplet) at the top of the notation, and replace all 2-note triplets with eighth notes.

But now we come to the heart of the problem - the Greek triplet melodies are not swing or jazz. Rhythmically, they are placed between eighths and triplets, fitting none of them totally and only leaning towards the swing.

Thus, with a rhythm section that feels like straight 4/4 and a melody that is in triplets, but not in swing or European folk manner, the only logical way to notate it is - the **4/4. - the four dotted quarter notes time signature.**

This solves both problems - the rhythmical as well as melodic.

The upper number indicates that the rhythm is rooted firmly on the 4 beats, which in the Hasapiko guitar pattern are:  
bass—chord—5th bass—chord.

The four dotted quarter notes symbol gives the frame to write the triplets clearly, without the visual noise, as if in 12/8. But the 4, the top number of the time signature, indicates that these triplets are to be played close to eighth notes, not with an overly swing feel.

Thanks to the awesomeness of [Lilypond](#), the music notation software, it's easy to create this time signature.

As you know, it's a Balkan old-time tradition to name rhythms and time signatures. How to name this new one?

I thought that **Sirtaki** is the proper name for this.

Because, the term Sirtaki is an invented term, to serve the film's main soundtrack in Zorba the Greek, and the dramatic speeding up of that instrumental.

However, speeding up is natural in the Balkans from before Zorba, and it's organically tied to the pulse of the dancers.

On the other hand, the melody of the song [Siko Horepse Sirtaki](#) (Σήκω Χόρεψε Συρτάκι) by Zambetas (Ζαμπέτας) is in triplets performed in a 4/4-feel time signature. This was by far the most popular Greek song of the time, using swing-influenced melody.

So, my proposal is to **name the 4/4. time as Sirtaki**, as triplets over 4/4 are a far more radical change in modern Greek music than an instrumental that drastically speeds up.

I had mixed feelings when I started notating the first songs in this Sirtaki, 4/4. time. On one side, I was very excited - look! This looks simple, elegant, easy on the eye - reflecting the nature and inner logic of the melody.

On the other side, I thought - what are you doing Viktor? This is just another of your silly inventions that will die in 6 months time, you'll forget it and you'll wonder - what did I do with my life in the last 6 months?

But many years later, this time signature feels right, natural and proper.

That fact encouraged me to write this testimony, this diary of the journey through Rebetiko, Jazz, eighths and triplets.