Thoma Nassi (1892–1964) and the *Vatra* Band

Thoma Nassi, who arrived from America in 1920 with his band as volunteers to help Albania, significantly enriched musical activity in Korçë. Although his contribution to Albanian musical life was unique, he was not regarded favourably by the post–war regime in Albania; his vocal and instrumental works were not performed, his musical activities as conductor and composer were not discussed.[[1]](#footnote-1) In short, he was never given the credit he deserved as an art composer, as one of the first to introduce Western musical culture into Korçë, Albania.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Nassi was born in Dardha, near Korçë, in south-east Albania. At the age of 12 (probably), Nassi, like many young Albanians of this region, migrated first to Greece and later to the United States in 1914. At the age of 26, he graduated in composition and conducting from the New England Conservatory in Boston. The following information was given to me by Nassi’s daughter, Carmen Nassi Bartlett:

Just when my father emigrated I cannot say—but when he left Albania it was to go to Greece where he and his sister were raised by his uncle. He attended schools there and was fairly well educated before he left for the U.S. He spoke English, fluent Greek, Albanian & Italian and French to some extent. When he arrived in the States, he had contracts in Millinocket, Maine. There he worked at the Great Northern Paper Co. and became the foreman. As a result of his work there he was able to save money to go to the New England Conservatory. He also gave private lessons (his interest had always been music) and one of his students was my mother—and of course the rest is their personal history.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In Boston, Nassi set up amateur groups of mandolin players in which young Albanians took part. These groups were similar to ones which were fashionable ‘beyond the ocean’, in Korçë.

His interest in the music of his countrymen dates from March 1915, when he organized the first Albanian string orchestra, *Përparimi*, in Natick. Four months later he formed the Boston Albanian Mandolin Club. Toward the end of the same year these two groups were united to form the *Dodona* orchestra, which had about forty players. *Dodona* gave its first concert in Franklin Memorial Hall in Boston to an audience of 800. A year later *Vatra* Band was organized in Worcester, with 37 members. Soon *Vatra* and *Dodona* were giving concerts in many New England cities (‘The Albanian Struggle’ 1939, 144).

About the participants in the above mentioned groups, Nassi states:

Its members were young Albanian men without previous musical experience, most of them being factory workers. However, they joined the band with a great desire to learn, and, within a year, they were able to participate in concerts and parades in Boston, Worcester, New Bedford, Camp Devens in Massachusetts and so on … The only other Albanian band in the United States in those days was the Jamestown, New York band, conducted by one of the townspeople, Thomas Vishnia (Nassi 1960, ‘Speech given …’).

In the year 1920, ‘when the fate of Albania hung in the balance’, the *Vatra* Band played an important role; motivated by patriotic instinct, their members were prepared to go to Albania, to support the independence struggle and raise the morale of their compatriots in the battlefield. A 120-person brigade, among which thirty band musicians, arrived in Albania from Boston.

In the early spring of 1920, the idea of a pilgrimage to Albania to help the national cause finally took concrete form, and the military volunteers, band, and several other important Albanians were ready for the voyage. I had just been discharged from the United States Army where I served as a Bandmaster. Since I had married immediately upon leaving the service, I was, naturally, reluctant to leave my new bride but because the band couldn’t go without a director—and I was the only one available—I was finally persuaded to participate (Nassi 1960, ‘Speech given …’).

The Albanian-American volunteers marched first to capital, Tirana, then in late summer 1920 to southeast, Korçë, before attacking the Italian Front in Drashovicë, Vlorë. This is how Nassi describes one of ‘those historic happenings’ when the band was entering Korçë: ‘The *Vatra* Band and the American volunteers received orders from the government to proceed to Përmet, Ersekë and Korçë. Although the first two cities greeted us with wild enthusiasm the greatest ovation awaited us as we marched into Korçë—the *Vatra* Band playing triumphantly and proudly—surrounded on both sides by Albanians who showered us with flowers amid joyous cries and tears’. After a series of battles between Italian garrisoned forces and Albanian nationalists, the Italians were then forced to withdraw.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Later on in his speech of 1960, Nassi tells of the conversation with Finnish geologist, Professor Jakob Sederholm, delegate of the League of Nations, who expressed the opinion that ‘a nation that could produce such groups as this *Vatra* Band and who could love music as much as the people demonstrated by flocking to concerts, certainly deserved their freedom’. In the same 1960 speech Nassi recalled: ‘During our meetings, I dared ask Professor Sederholm how the fate of Korçë was to be decided. He cautioned me to be discreet lest I injure the national cause … He seemed to be inspired by his own role, and I am sure that his recommendations were critical in the decision to free Korçë’.

As soon as the *Vatra* Band and the American volunteers were settled in Korçë in 1920, they marched from town to town, and from region to region, ‘where all the populace, provisional government, and clergy, greeted our arrival enthusiastically. At that time, regency headed by Sotir Peci, was governing Albania. The Albanian government had realized the value of having the *Vatra* band tour the country to raise the morale of the Albanian people so it arranged to send the band to all the large cities’ (Nassi 1960, ‘Speech given …’). One the most unforgettable moments of the *Vatra*’*s* activity at the front, in 1920, was, as Nassi describes it, when

we received a frantic call from the Vlora fighting forces asking us to pay them a visit to help keep their morale high … the epic battle had captured the attention of the entire world, [and] it seemed that all correspondents were on the side of the gallant Albanians whose bravery was described in daily dispatches … once or twice each day we went to the front to play for the Albanian fighters.… During this time, one of the Albanian chieftains―his name, I think, was Bajram Curri[[5]](#footnote-5)—wrote an inspired little poem that impressed me so much I set it to music. Its title was ‘Vlora, Vlora, bjeri më të lumtë dora’ (Vlora, Vlora, strike again, thanks to your hands).[[6]](#footnote-6) The song became an instant success and in just a few days spread all over Albania. According to Dorothy Thompson in one of her radio broadcasts, ‘The Albanians were singing ‘Vlora, Vlora’ while they were attacking the Italians’. This song has since become an Albanian classic and is sung to this day.

After the evacuation of the Italians, all the Albanians who had fought entered Vlora with the band at the head singing, *Vlora, Vlora, bjeri më të lumtë dora*! They were greeted as liberators with frenzied enthusiasm by the populace. Later on, Nassi tells about their return to Korçë where ‘after a few days of festivities and rest at Vlora’, they were asked to continue their mission:

I carried with me some stringed instruments that I had rescued from the Drashovica theatre. Being an Albanian, I went for some ‘plaçkë’ [loot] too! Among these were two excellent string basses which later became the nucleus of a fine orchestra in Korçë. Our classical concerts continued and many music festivals and balls were given. The social life of Korçë flourished with all of the first families participating—replenished by other families who came from Romania, Egypt, and the United States, now that Albania was free.

The *Vatra* Band, in its main capacity, played an energetic part, and greatly stimulated music in Korçë. The bandsmen performed in public gardens and large courtyards and the people of Korçë enjoyed tremendously this completely new sound—western band music. ‘The band began playing two open air concerts every week at *Kopështi i Themistokli Gërmenjit*. Our programs comprised classical music—a typical one would consist of an overture, a symphonic movement, operatic selections (usually Wagner), a Strauss waltz, and then an arrangement of Albanian songs for community singing’.

The people of Korçë, particularly the youngsters, who had enjoyed performing *serenatas*, now became interested in learning music from experienced musicians. Nassi invited ‘the best and most educated elements of Korçë to participate, as occurs in all of the cities of the civilised world’.[[7]](#footnote-7) One of the most important musical events of the year 1922 was the foundation of the ‘Fine Arts Society’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Nassi was the originator of this idea and became the head of the society.

It became evident that more musical organizations were necessary to satisfy the insatiable hunger of the Albanian people for music. In a few weeks, another band was organized, the *Banda e Korçës*, by young students, and in a short period of time, it began to give concerts. A number of Festivals of Music were organized since local talent was in abundance. The first abbreviated opera, ‘Il Trovatore’, was performed. The state director, Vangjush Mio, was a celebrated Albanian artist. This thirst for new music by the Albanian people gave me the opportunity to compose many songs whose words were written by such prominent Albanians as Kristo Floqi, Remzi Qyteza, Ali Asllani, and others (Nassi 1960, ‘Speech given …’).

Being enthusiastic about this marvellous atmosphere, the Korçë newspaper ‘Koha’ wrote on 25th February 1922: ‘Music and the arts are among the most necessary means for an individual. They entertain the soul of the individual, they make you forget doubt and uncertainty, they cure a broken heart, and they turn you to sweetness, love, and happiness’.

Nassi stayed in Korçë until 1925, and the transformations he accomplished, thanks to his activities and compositions, left a deep impact on the cultural life of the city and on people’s minds. For a variety of reasons, he could not make the same impact in Tiranë, where he moved in 1925, as he had made in Korçë. In fact he had intended to move to Tiranë in 1924 when

the progressive forces took command and established a government with Bishop—now Archbishop—Fan S. Noli as Prime Minister. Bishop Noli dreamed of making a Switzerland out of Albania. He enlisted me to help him make plans for bringing from Italy a group of First Chair musicians who would teach at a Conservatory of Music while also becoming the nucleus of the first Albanian Symphony Orchestra. As a diversion, I taught Bishop Noli how to play the French horn during his brief stay in the capital! Unfortunately, Bishop Noli’s government did not last long. A reactionary army headed by the ambitious Ahmet Zogu was able to defeat the government forces and occupy the capital. Bishop Noli managed to escape to Italy, a very discouraged man. When I met him later, he would say to me, ‘Tashi për mua mbeti vetëm mjekra’ (All I have left is my beard). An Albanian government now with Ahmed Zogu as Prime Minister was formed, and I was requested to come to the capital with the *Vatra* band. Naturally, we were sorry to leave Korçë and its talented, music-loving people but we were soon established at the capital with its diplomatic representatives and high social life. My own life at the capital was full of delights and frustrations―mostly, the latter. For example, I would visit the different Albanian government ministers with a list of things I wanted done for the cause of music, and I was very anxious to get them. But the ministers had different ideas, and I would be chided that the Americans were a ‘hurried’ people. … At the capital, we continued with our concerts and other musical activities. Through the Ministry of Education, I was able to organize the teaching of music throughout the country, especially in the schools. Some of the musicians which I developed and brought from Shkodra and Korçë were young men such as Kristaq [Kristo] Kono, Juri Trebicka, Kristaq Antoniu, and others who are, today, the leaders of music of Albania. May I say here that they are truly wonderful leaders who have developed Albania musically to an astonishing degree?

Well that my duty was still to Albania but I anticipated dire consequences for my family if I remained. Black clouds were already gathering―Mussolini had begun his ambitious program of conquest, Albania was one of the first to be ruthlessly attacked and conquered by him.

An early musical collaboration with Fan Noli, based initially on their efforts to reform the music used in services of the Albanian Orthodox Church, reinforced their friendship either in Boston in the first decade of the 20th century, or in Tiranë in the 1920s, again in Boston after 1925 and for the rest of their lives (see more above *Choral Activities*).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Nassi left Albania for the USA in 1926, and never saw his native country again.[[10]](#footnote-10) Along with his family he moved to Cape Cod (Massachusetts) where provided most of the school music education in the Upper Cape. He founded many performance organisations, including the forerunner to the present Cape Cod Symphony. He died in 1964 and his Page I obituary in the Cape Cod Standard Times retold his work to establish the Monomauset Orchestra on the Lower Cape, the Cape Cod junior Community Band, an all-Cape orchestra, the Cape Cod Philharmonic Society and the Chatham Band, to name but a few.

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Thoma Nassi had a many-faceted career as a music leader and educator. With the skill and experience Nassi gained in America, he attempted to invest in the musical life of Korçë during the 1920s. The foundation of the *Fine Arts* *Society* (1920) with Nassi as its chairman, resulted in the formation in 1922 of a 60-strong male-voice choir. The baritone Mihal Ciko and the painter Vangjush Mio were among its leading figures. Youth choirs with young men only (‘Korçare Youth’ with 40 members) or girls only (‘Female Normale’ with 90 girls) also operated. The even more direct impact of choral singing in Korçë, after the departure of Nassi, was a result of the close contacts with the Albanian Society of Bucharest, which was founded in 1884 and later on set up a choir purely for patriotic purposes.[[11]](#footnote-11) The Albanian National Anthem (still used today), which originated under these same circumstances, with the same choir and for the same patriotic purposes, is a clear illustration of the powerful role that the choral society of Bucharest played in the early years of this century.[[12]](#footnote-12) With the arrival of Sotir Kosmo from Bucharest in the 1920s, and after the departure of Nassi, choral activity in Korçë continued to progress. The *Lyra* (Lira) society, founded in Korçë in 1928, with its 30-strong choir, played an enormous role in reviving choral urban serenade songs of the *kantadha* type. Arbatsky in his article ‘The music in Albania’, written in 1939, states: ‘There is only one choral society in the whole Albania, with its centre, Korçë’ (Arbatsky, 1939, 43).

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*Kënga Karakteristike Korçare*, KKK (Korçare Distinctive Song), which also found its expression in the Late Romantic style (*serenata korçare*), normally used the melodic and harmonic language of the Western major-minor system; Nassi, by embracing this, as well as the Light style, demonstrated his own attributes in the field. A particular aspect, such as the adaptation, more or less, of a modal harmony to a modal tune in order to preserve as far as possible a traditional sound, represented a challenging task for composers like Nassi, who perhaps for the first time in the history of Albanian music stepped into such complex tonal-modal areas. Taking the song ‘To the Mountain Girl’ (Malësores), KKK–Example 25, I will try to clarify the problem.

Nassi’s songs, apart from being generally known as his own creations, also belong to the Group of KKK (Korçare Distinctive Songs). It is obvious that because Nassi was brought up and educated as a skilled musician in the USA and did not return to Albania until he was 28, his familiarity with Korçare songs did not develop in Albania, but was assimilated from fellow-immigrants in America. On the other hand, Nassi brought musical skills which he acquired in the USA, such as the discipline of formal structure, application of melodic and harmonic styles, and a functional use of piano accompaniment. Thus, his musical works clearly contain elements of an international style combined with national spirit in general, and the Korçë regional characteristics, in particular. In order to distinguish Nassi’s songs from the massive number of KKK(Korçare Distinctive Songs), both terms—**Nassi’s songs** and **KKK**, and both styles—the**Light** and **Late Romantic,** are used. The styles will be regarded as two different approaches, although both are included in the same body of KKK.

Different external forces enriched both Nassi’s songs and the KKK, and as a result a local prototype was created, often known as the repertory of KKK. Whatever influence those sources exercised either on Nassi’s songs or on the KKK (and it is worth repeating that Nassi learnt to compose in America), both main styles, the Light and Late Romantic, found their reflection in the repertory of the KKK. Most of the KKK of that period were better known than their composers; Nassi was an exception at the time because when he was in Albania (1920–1926), his songs were clearly known under his name. After his arrival from America, Nassi was known as a unique musical personality. In particular, when he wrote the patriotic song ‘Vlora–Vlora’ (KKK–Example 21), his fame knew no bounds. After he left Albania in 1926, Nassi’s songs were affirmed as his own compositions, because he published them in Boston. This made it possible to compare them with the KKKof his time (which are still sung today) and one can easily conclude that the two are not greatly different; both were inspired by the same external culture and made use of sources outside Albania to establish themselves.

A major reason why Nassi’s songs are—in general—so much like the KKK, is that he consciously tried to write in the same style, in the same language, Albanian, and the composers of the same or post-Nassi period wrote or adapted their songs both to Nassi’s style and the already consolidated LightKKK style. If Nassi’s songs required an understanding of musical theory and technique, as can be observed from his scores, many of the KKKdid not presuppose the same requirements. The best of the latter songs survived thanks to their simplicity and their directness. People appreciated how effortlessly the tunes flowed and how their lyrics matched the mood and simple nature of the song.

As far as Nassi’s songs of Late Romantic style are concerned, it should be stressed that a new generation of local composers was about to emerge in the late 1920s, who, in the coming years, were particularly apt to follow those features which characterised Nassi’s Late Romantic style. The people of Korçë often associated Nassi’s songs with their KKK and were happy to do so.

One of the prolific composers of the 1930s from Korçë, who assimilated many features of the KKK trend, was Kristo Kono. Having studied music professionally, in France and Italy, Kono embraced both styles—the Light and Late Romantic—but as he originally composed romances, the late Romantic or maybe better, the romance style, was closer to his taste.

The oral folk and urban musical traditions in Albania proper found their expression in the KKK of which Nassi’s songs were, in essence, parts. ‘To the Mountain Girl’ (Malësores), KKK–Example 25, for instance, was inspired by Nassi’s exploration into oral folk-music traditions in the mountainous areas of Albania. This was a passionate attempt to detach him, for a while, from local confines and to attempt a pan-Albanian or a national type of song. After returning to America in 1926 and publishing his compositions there, he recalls his endeavours to explore the Albanian *national* traditional music:

For many years, both Albanian and foreign musicians who visited Albania believed that our national music was impossible to notate. Thus, if one wanted to engage oneself in the collection of this music, one had to fight against the prejudices of those, traditional and art musicians who did not show the slightest interest in this subject. In this dilemma I found myself when I arrived in Albania in 1920, as the director of the National Band, *Vatra*, and I concluded that one of the aims of my life was to be the collection of those few national melodies which still remained. This work was not easy, not only for the reasons mentioned above, but also because our professional musicians (or the *sazexhi*) had changed our simple melodies by mixing them up with the Turco-Byzantine music, and it needed a long study to select and bring them back to their original form. Thus, I hurried to complete this job, using all that spare time left after my different duties, so I could gather a considerable number of those melodies which later I organised in a definitive form, accompanied by a simple harmony, which should not spoil their natural beauty (Nassi 1930, 3).

Nassi is, undoubtedly, one of the first Albanian composers to make serious attempts to create an Albanian song of national character, i.e. one which combined northern tunes with the southern approach of KKK. It is worth stressing again that his instrumental music even more obviously aimed at capturing the national character of Albanian music.

Several of my own songs were written during this time [1925–26]. After a trip to isolated mountainous towns, I made a collection of musical themes which I still hope to develop. One firm favourite of the Albanians, my ‘Kënga e Mullirit’, was printed for the first time in Vlora. ‘Kënga e [Fyelli i] Bariut’ and ‘Katër Valle’ also became Albanian classics (Nassi 1960, ‘Speech given …’).

On the front cover of each instrumental sheet music published by Nassi in the USA was written: ‘A series of Albanian folk dances and songs collected during the author’s stay in Albania, from the mountain folk in the isolated rural districts, and never before published’.

Youry Arbatsky, who dealt seriously with Albanian music in the 1930s, in his article ‘Music in Albania’ (*Muzika në Shqipri*), in 1939, expressed his opinion of many Albanian musicians, and particularly of Nassi, in this way: ‘More fruitful has been Thoma Nassi, an excellent conductor and composer. He left for America with his wife and daughter who are first class musicians. An interesting composer in his own right, he belongs to the moderate modernists and has a list of his own compositions in which Albanian themes are developed. However, even he does not follow the autochthonous rhythms of the Albanian song’.

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**A survey of Nassi’s songs**

***To the Mountain Girl*** (Malësores): The fact that Nassi used traditional unwritten tunes from other regions of Albania shows his interest in the Albanian folk-music tradition as a whole, beyond the local idioms of the Korçare area, as this song, KKK–Example 25, contains tunes from the north of Albania. In fact, only the melodic motif and its rhythmic configuration reflect the traditional origins of the tune, while other components, such as its humorous character, *question* and *answer* form, melodic progress, harmonies, instrumental *cadenzas* and *fermatas*, suggest a light style of musical comedy, as if spoken dialogues were involved. The song is written for three male voices (tenor, baritone and bass) and piano accompaniment:

Standing on top of the bank Majë bregut po qëndron

Without a care for us Edhe ne s’na numuron

What are your thoughts just now Vallë çka mejtohesh

Why do you look so far away Çke sikur harrohesh

Why o mountain girl Pse moj malësore

Did you make my head spin? Mëndjen ti ma more?

When you run past us E kur ikën e nxiton

You don’t even look at us As na sheh as na kujton

Why do you never turn your head Pse s’kthen kokën fare

O you betrayer O moj tradhëtare

Why o mountain girl Pse moj malësore

Did you make my head spin? Mëndjen ti ma more

O you mountain girl Ah moj malësore

You made my head spin. Mëndjen ti ma more.

In the first section the three voices are treated separately, as if they were acting the parts of three different characters in a play. A musical conversation in a minor key (F minor), between three male characters, takes place in the first half of the song, in which Nassi uses throughout only the two main functions of the tonal harmony, the tonic and dominant. The latter degree usually has seventh or even a ninth, while the fourth or second degrees are rarely used, although the melody suggests them. A possible reason why Nassi did not harmonise the first and third bars was to avoid a continuous use of, more-or-less, the same harmonic functions. The musical idea of the refrain section is written for three voices supported and doubled by the piano accompaniment in a major key (F major); the melody sung by the male trio is transformed from a ‘mountain’ tune at the beginning, into a cheerful urban song in Korçare Light style. However, the humorous character of the traditional northern tune, which appeared at the beginning of the song, is still preserved in the refrain section by the articulation of the quaver notes and their *staccato* delivery.

***Love Dream*** (Ëndër Dashurie), Example 22―This song is closer to the type of sentimental songs found worldwide. This would best convey the definition of the Late Romantic style which is discussed throughout this section. The obvious feature of this style, its sentimentalism, stands out vividly in the melody, which reveals unsteady, passionate motifs supported by an emotional and predictable harmony. The symmetrical and diatonic melody, based on a nostalgic and naive text of Kreshpani (see more above aboutLate Romanticstyle), after the agitated mood of the strophe, bursts into a major refrain where love seems to resolve all the unsettled emotional problems of the first section; the triplets of quavers, used as an impulsive, passionate element in the strophe, now in the major refrain are transformed into more ‘stable’ binary quavers and semi-quavers, as a direct appeal for stability in love.

***The Miller’s Song*** (Kënga e Mullirit), Example 26―Another aspect of Nassi’s songs is revealed when its sentimentalism is treated as a ‘stoical’ vision. Here is the text of the song written by the Albanian poet Remzi Qyteza:

The sun moves around, the earth goes around Djelli vërtitet, bota rrutullon

Years and centuries pass unnoticed, Vit’edhe shekuj,shkojn’e s’kuptohen,

How sad that people die and are left forgotten. Mjerisht si njerzit vdesin, harohen.

The water circulates, the stone turns, Uji vërtitet guri rrutullon,

Day and night the mill is working, Dit’edhe natë mulliri punon,

Wheat and corn are brought Grur’edhe misër vijn’e dërrmohen,

The bread is made. Bukë gatohen.

Flow water, whirlwind Rith o ujë, fryj moj erë

Rotate o stones as you always do Vërtit gurë, si ngaher[ë]

Flow and whirl fast, Rith dhe fry shumë të shpejt,

Make the flower fine and light. Bëje mjellë t’ollë dhe të leht.

As can be seen from the perpetual labour of the mill in the text, the poet equates this occurrence with the progress of life, and, by accepting this circular form as an everlasting motion, he suggests making the *journey* ‘fine and light’. The ‘stoical’ element of the poetry is reflected in music by the application of the distant intervals, mainly the perfect fifths. The entry of the bass voice (at the very start of the song) is framed in stable intervals of the tonic (E flat major, bars 9 and 12) and dominant (B flat major, bars 10–11). After an eight-bar piano introduction of a clearly distinctive melodic theme in a 6/8 metre, the accompaniment creates the feeling of continuous movement, but in a steady rhythm or in an ‘imperturbable’ *tempo*. The entry of the tenor voice (bars 13–16), built in a downwards, stepwise sequence, is characterised by a more hesitant or unstable phrase, but, again, the bass maintains the stability of the former ‘stoical’ mood. The mezzo-soprano, supported by the humming chorus (bars 21–28), re-affirms the main ‘stoical’ idea of the bass in the first half of the phrase, then, by use of the melodic line of the second half of the introduction (bar 5), the principal idea becomes less philosophical and more mundane; ‘the water circulates, the stone goes around, day and night the mill is working’. In the next few bars (bar 35 until the end of the song), the 6/8 *canzonetta*-like metre and rhythm create a mood of perpetual circulation together with the chorus and soloists, but in a ‘fine and light’ atmosphere. ‘This song’―it is written at the end of the score―’was sung for the first time at the Festival of the Fine Arts Society in Korçë, on 7 July 1922, with Mr. Mihal Kosma as soloist and chorus master, and was repeated several times in the succeeding concerts to the applause of the audience’ (see more about this song in *Illustrations*, Figure 20).

***The Summer Came Again*** (Prapë Ardhi Vera), KKK–Example 23―a love-song for voice and piano with lyrics by Kristo Floqi, is written in the same Late Romantic style, perhaps slightly ‘lighter’ than the ‘Love Dream’ (Ëndër Dashurie), Example 22. The dominant contrast is between the minor and major sections, although this contrast does not appear in the poem. The musical effect which Nassi wanted was achieved by the use of conventional formal structures (the major refrain being a form of contrast which suited the Late Romantic style) rather than simply by illustrating and reflecting the content of the poem. In the unison choral version of the same song, recorded by the ‘Lyra’ choir of Korçë, the sentimental feeling, more obvious when the song is sung solo, is transfigured into a light-hearted mood, as in a LightKKK.

One of Nassi’s most popular songs, which displays not only his Light style but also the Korçë local style, is ***Your Eyes Enchant Me*** (O moj ti me syt’e zinj), KKK–Example 24, with lyrics by Asdren. It is an astonishingly simple song with its melody completely diatonic, built on a sequence of simple leaps (fourths being the preferred intervals), and with symmetrical motifs. The atmosphere is that of a major key and the harmonies are diatonic, using only the tonic, dominant and subdominant degrees. The second phrase, in which the choir takes part, sounds particularly enchanting because of its *fermatas* right on the top note of the climax of the song (very characteristic of Neapolitan songs). This simplicity did not come from ignorance or lack of invention, because in his instrumental works he showed that he was capable of using more diverse harmonies and complicated formal structures, but he understood that truly LightKKK must be grasped at the first hearing and should be easily conveyed in the *sokaks* of Korçë by its native singers.

Among Nassi’s adaptations for voice and piano, the ***Flag Anthem*** can also be mentioned here. The cover of the copy reads: ‘Set in music by Thoma Nassi, published by Orleans, Cape Cod, Mass.; First Printing―January, 1918; Second Printing, April, 1947’. It may be possible that the Arbëresh singer Guiseppe Mauro and the musician and poet from Korçë, Spiridhon Ilo, who sung and recorded the anthem together in 1918 and 1923 in the USA, were based on Nassi’s adaptation for voice and piano. An interesting fact is that the words were written not by the Albanian poet Asdren, who is best known for writing the words to the Albanian national anthem, but by the playwright Kristo Floqi.

Nassi’s violin or flute pieces, such as ‘The Shepherd’s Flute’ (Fyelli i bariut), ‘The Nightingale’ (Bilbili), ‘Four Dances’ (Katër valle) and ‘Albanian Lament’ (E qarë), are presented in a CD,[[13]](#footnote-13) performed by Gent Koço and published in Saint Petersburg, Russia, in 2005. These pieces were composed in Albania in the early 1920s, but were printed and published later on in America and, apparently, there were no requests from any Albanian flautist or violinist in Albania to perform them during the 1920s and 30s. When Gent recorded all the above mentioned violin pieces, he was only 16 years old. As the recording venue in Huddersfield Town Hall was booked only for a short time in the late evening, there was not sufficient time for him to do more than one take, sometimes two, for each piece. He has since performed Nassi’s pieces on numerous occasions; however, it was his debut that was stamped in this CD.

**Nassi’s set of compositions[[14]](#footnote-14)**

Nassi divided his early compositions, into Music for Voice and Piano, and Music for Flute(or Violin)and Piano; the first are specified as **Published by Thomas Nassi** and the second **Published by The Nassi Music School**.

In the group of Music for Voice and Piano, the following vocal pieces are included:

*Flag Anthem* (Hymni i Flamurit), for voice and piano, adapted by Thoma Nassi, words by Kristo Floqi; First Printing―January, 1918; Second Printing―April, 1947.

*The Summer Came Again* (Prapë Ardhi Vera), a love-song, for voice and piano (për zë dhe piano), with lyrics by (vjersha prej) Kristo Floqi.

*To the Mountain Girl* (Malësores), for men’s trio and piano (për trio burrash dhe piano), with lyrics by (vjersha prej) Kristo Floqi.

*Your Eyes Enchant Me* (O moj ti me syt’ e zinj), lyrics by (fjalët prej) Asdren.

*Love Dream* (Ëndër Dashurie), with lyrics by (vjersha prej) Nick Kreshpani;

*The Miller’s Song* (Kënga e Mullirit), with lyrics by (vjersha prej) Remzi Qyteza.

In the group Music for Flute (or Violin) and Piano, the following pieces are included:

*The Shepherd’s Flute* (Fyelli i Bariut), all the pieces were adapted by Prof. Thomas Nassi, Founder and former Director of the Albanian Royal Band and published by The Nassi Music School, 69 Glenwood Street: Brockton, Mass.

*The Nightingale* (Bilbili), e Muços, Kryemuzikantit të Ali Pashës’ (of Muço, the Ali Pasha’s Chief Musician), an Albanian traditional folk song.

*Four Dances* (Katër Valle), A suite of Albanian folk dances: a) Salushe, b) Beraçe, c) E hequr, d) Gajdë.

*Albanian Lament* (E Qarë).[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. One or two articles were published such as Endri Keko’s ‘The Creation of the Patriotic Song, *Vlora–Vlora*’ (*Drita* newspaper, 31st October 1982), but those were written more out of personal considerations than for the purposes of musical analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A factor which might have affected Nassi’s reputation was his initial support of Zogu, as Prime Minister. Nassi composed an anthem for Zogu with lyrics by Kristo Floqi. The latter was also excluded from the literary list in the post-war periods, although he dominated Albanian drama in the early 20th century. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Letter sent to me by Nassis’s daughter, Carmen Bartlett, on 9th June 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This very moment had a great impact in the struggle of Albanians for safeguarding their territories at a time when its borders and future were discussed in the [Paris Peace Conference](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paris_Peace_Conference,_1919). The Vlora War was seen as a turning point in the establishment of Albanian independence. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nassi’s slight hesitation (during the speech) about the poet’s name was right; instead of mentioning Ali Asllani, the real author of the poem, he mentions Bajram Curri, who was an eminent figure of the Albanian resistance, but not a poet. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See KKK–Example 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Koha’ newspaper, Korçë, 11th September 1920. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The official date of the foundation of the *Fine Arts* *Society* (*Shoqëria e Arteve të Bukura*) is generally known as the 10th of December, 1920. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Fan Noli is well known for founding the Albanian Orthodox Church in Boston, USA in 1908. He is also recognised for his arrangements and translations into Albanian, mostly based upon hymns drawn from both the Byzantine and Slavonic choral traditions. When Noli adapted his translations and set them to music, his approach owed something to more than just his love of Russian music; his Russian-inspired Albanian musical liturgy was conceived within the specific socio-historical context of early 20th century America. He understood that America offered him the freedom to draw upon several resources. His approach was also well suited to the program of Albanian national awakening, the separation of the Albanian Church from the Greek Patriarchate and the introduction of the Albanian language into its liturgy. Noli had a very broad understanding of pastoral life, just as he did in other aspects of his life’s work, and I believe it was a spiritual guidance on his part. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Returning to his adopted home, Nassi brought his rich musical experience to Cape Cod in 1928. Over the next 20 years, the Nassis and their three children built an instrumental music program in schools from Harwich to Province-town and inspired a new love for music in a grateful Cape community. From the Nassi’s three children, Albert, Madeline and Carmen, the first one, Albert, a talented violinist and Air Force pilot, was among the first killed on D-Day in 1944. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. According to Lasgush Poradeci, the well-known Albanian poet, the first gathering of the choir, consisting of Albanian emigrants, was held under Kiriak, in 1907. ‘Professor Kiriak was an important figure in Romanian artistic life and, from the outset, he included not only Romanian songs, but also a march, called *Come Today Albanians* with lyrics written by Asdren. The choir was set up with a high national mission, to perform songs of its native land, to beautify the religious service in the Albanian church of Bucharest. Among national foundations there also is the church of the Albanian Orthodox community’; Frida Idrizi, *Lasgush Poradeci*, *op*. *cit*., p. 365. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The members of the choir asked Asdren, a great patriot and the soul of the Albanian Society in Bucharest, to write an Albanian anthem. ‘The veteran Asdren did not say a word because such was his modest nature, but in the second or the third meeting, he appeared with the anthem in his hands, written in Albanian, under the title ‘United around the Flag’. A member of the choir seized it from his hands and with Professor Jonescu playing on the organ, they sang altogether.…Thus the anthem became the National Anthem of the Colony of Bucharest and the choristers made a habit of singing the anthem before and after the choir’s rehearsals’ (Frida Idrizi: *Lasgush Poradeci*, *The literary works* … *ibid*). Korça was chosen as the town where the anthem was to be introduced. Most of the members of the Albanian Colony in Bucharest were from Korça. In 1908, the rebel poet, Hilë Mosi who used to write nationalistic verses, came to Bucharest and was closely associated with Asdren. Hilë Mosi and Tashko Ilo (the latter was the member of the above mentioned choir) arrived in Korça in 1908 with the anthem, trying to find opportunities to distribute it first in Korça and then around the whole of Albania. It was not an easy task to make the anthem known under the conditions of Turkish suzerainty, but Hilë Mosi was the right person to be chosen for this objective. Although the anthem, brought to Albania in 1909, was not composed with the aim of making a national symbol (only as a hymn for a society), it so happened that when the need for a national anthem arose, it spread through Albania with an extraordinary rapidity. The *Korça Choir* sang the anthem on the proclamation of the independence of Albania, in November 1912. The music of the anthem was written by the prominent Romanian composer, Ciprian Porumbescu. In fact, the music was not intended as an anthem but simply as a hymn tune, probably for the king of Romania. This tune is still sung and broadcast today in Romania but not, of course, to the same words as in the Albanian anthem. This did not disturb the official authorities, so the music of the anthem was not changed. Certainly, there were many efforts by Albanians to write music for the National anthem but the present tune is still unaffected. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. CD―*Albanian Music Classics* (Klasikë Muzikorë Shqiptarë): Gjoka/ [Nassi](https://www.discogs.com/artist/2413807-Thoma-Nassi?anv=Nassi)/ [Noli](https://www.discogs.com/artist/2413803-Fan-S-Noli?anv=Noli)/ [Shehu](https://www.discogs.com/artist/2413802-Murat-Shehu?anv=Shehu); world premiere recordings, Kailas Records, San Petersburg, kls 037, 2005, Dolina Bartanga; see more about *Thoma Nassi’s Instrumental Pieces* in *Notation*, Examples 36–39. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nassi’s set of compositions analysed in this study were sent to me by the Very Rev. Arthur E. Liolin, Chancellor of the Albanian Orthodox Archdiocese in America, for which I should like to extend my gratitude. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Apart from these early compositions, Nassi is said to be the author of two rhapsodies, a mass, two operettas and several marches. So far, I have not been able to see these scores, which belong to the period after 1926, when he finally migrated to America. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)