

**Joyce's Favourite Greek Song**  
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<https://www.rte.ie/radio/podcasts/22058380-joyces-favourite-greek-song-by-fran-orourke/>

Versions of the song may be heard as follows:

1930's French recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HV185Te0WhQ>

1917 Greek recording: <https://www.vmrebetiko.gr/item/?id=5066>

James Joyce enthused about all things Hellenic, both classical and contemporary. In the foreign cities where he lived, he sought out the company of Greeks, believing them to be the natural inheritors of an ancient legacy. He made serious efforts to learn the language. One of those who taught him Modern Greek in Zurich was Paul Ruggiero, who had spent many years in Greece. He also taught Joyce some Greek songs, one of which, a lament for first love, became one of his favourites. Years later Ruggiero provided Joyce's biographer Richard Ellmann with the Greek text and an English translation:

I walked out all alone on the strand  
To remember how we had wept together  
When I kiss you, you remember it too.  
Now I love another, a blonde  
Much prettier than you.  
But at the bottom of the heart  
First love keeps its deep roots.

Not very complimentary, it would seem, to the former beloved but the purpose of the serenade was to recall the unique beauty of first love.

In September 1938 Joyce wrote to Ruggiero from Paris with excitement: 'The other day I heard a French singer on the radio singing your song, but in French. The accompaniment is very beautiful and the singer sings with exquisite taste. I want to buy the disc, or rather two: one for me and one for you.'

Two months later he wrote again: "I have found the record. It is called "Un Reve" and the house is full of its melody. I also bought one for you and it will be sent to you next Wednesday.

You will be delighted with it. ... Next Thursday, on the American Thanksgiving Day, some friends are giving a little supper for me. I should like to sing your song in French and also in Greek. Could you let me have the words in time, clearly written out, with a translation?

By the way, the words are different in the French text. There is nothing about the sea in it, no laughter and no blonde, but great sadness. My wife cried when she was listening to it. What the deuce is there in music, and above all in singing, that moves us so deeply?"

With an interest in Joyce's use of song, I wanted to track down both the Greek and French versions of the song. The University of Tulsa, which holds Richard Ellmann's archive, kindly sent me the Greek text, written in Latin characters, which Ruggiero had supplied. But I had no idea what the song sounded like.

On a visit to the James Joyce Foundation in Zurich I mentioned this to Fritz Senn, its founder and director. 'Oh', he said, 'that must be the old 78 Ruggiero donated to the Foundation: we have it in our safe with Joyce's death mask!'

Fritz allowed me take this precious, fragile, record to an electronics shop on the cobblestoned central street in old Zurich, where the LP was transferred to a digital CD. Two days later with great anticipation we inserted the CD into Fritz Senn's computer. Joyce was right: the singer sang with exquisite taste and the accompaniment was beautiful. It had, however, the added accompaniment of what sounded like the full Irish crackling on the morning stove, such was the surface noise on the seventy-year-old record after thousands of revolutions. The title of the song was indeed "Un reve" ("A Dream"), and the singer was Jean Lumiere. The French text was much more romantic, saying that if life were an embrace the singer would rest forever on his lover's breast.

Having discovered the French version of his favourite Greek song, Joyce sang both as his party piece, accompanying himself on guitar – the guitar that is well known from the famous photograph taken in Zurich in 1917. Back in Zurich, Joyce later gifted his guitar to Paul Ruggiero.

When the Joyce Tower Museum opened in Sandycove in 1966, its first curator Vivian Veale (now Vivian Igoe) travelled to Zurich in search of memorabilia. Fritz Senn asked Ruggiero if he would donate Joyce's guitar. 'It's easier to beg on behalf of someone else', he remarked. Ruggiero generously donated Joyce's guitar to the Museum, and he sang for Vivian Joyce's favourite Greek song.

In the century since the iconic photograph was taken, the guitar had taken many knocks. Plastic filler had been used to repair its many cracks; rusting metal strings did nothing for its condition. Thanks to the initiative of guitarist John Feeley the instrument was beautifully restored in 2012. This was made possible by generous donations from poet Paul Muldoon, Friends of the Joyce Tower, and local restaurateur Peter Caviston. At an estimated age of two hundred years, the instrument regained its original warm pleasant sound.

In a Zoom event for Bloomsday organised by the Hellenic community of Ireland during the first lockdown, I referred to Joyce's favourite Greek song, expressing regret that, despite exhaustive research I had not located the original Greek song. Within a week I received an email from a Greek scholar, with a link to a 1966 recording. Further searches unearthed a 1917 recording. The song is attributed to the Greek composer Dionysius Lavragkas, who spent some time as orchestra conductor in France. He most likely brought the melody with him, but allowed his French lyricist to adapt the song to a more appropriate Gallic sentiment.