

Why Greeks Love Mikis Theodorakis—and His Music

by Theodore Andromidas and Dean Andromidas

Men like Mikis Theodorakis are rare. There is no more beloved figure for the Hellenic people. And he has come to represent, and still lead, the struggles of the Greek people against what have been centuries of war, against first the Ottoman, and then British Empire.

Born on the island of Chios in 1925, he spent his childhood in the towns and villages of the Greek countryside, becoming familiar with the music of Greece. It was in the Peloponnesian town of Tripolis, where he spent his teenage years, that he first heard Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and decided then to become a composer.

Yet, you cannot really understand why he is so loved by the Greek people, without understanding his life-long struggle, not just to defeat British-controlled fascism, but to create a new musical voice for Greece.

In 1972, when he was in exile during the Colonels' Junta that ruled Greece militarily at the time, he wrote this in the forward of the book *Mikis Theodorakis: Music and Social Change*, by George Giannaris:

Search as one may in the poetic texts that I have used, one will not find any political slogans. One will find neither obvious nor hidden propaganda concerning specific political viewpoints. Consequently, the politicization of my art is exclusively the result of two causes (a) its forthrightness, and (b) my personal commitment. This is the consequence and the cost that springs forth from my basic principle that art ought to communicate at every moment with the people. In other words, it ought to involve the masses.

The masses, however, are not something abstract but are, on the contrary, totally concrete. For instance, masses for me are the Greek people who today live under certain conditions that produce specific problems, expectations, ideologies, ideals. From its historical past, this people

has inherited particular traditions principles, customs, sensitivity, learning and a specific intellectual and cultural foundation. Hence in order to converse with this people, at this moment, and in order to give it—with the form of an artistic work—aesthetic truths that will concern it, the artist himself, as well as this work, must be immersed in this historical reality. This means that he must be sincere, as his work, too, must be sincere.

This is the essence of the issue of the politicization of my work. There is, however, something else. Creative expression is, above all, an act of freedom. 'I create' means 'I am free; I become free.' The message of art is the message of freedom. Therefore, the art that wants to express, faithfully and sincerely, a people that struggles for its freedom, aspires to win not only the love of this people, but also the hatred of its enemies. It is a great, a consummate aspiration, which I do not hide; I have pursued it with all my heart.¹

It was also in Tripolis that Theodorakis began this lifelong struggle against British operations designed to destroy Greece and its culture. The Second World War had begun and Tripolis was occupied by the Italians. It was here that Theodorakis participated in his first act of resistance against the fascist occupation of Greece, by participating in a massive protest on the 25th of March, the anniversary of the Greek struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire. This was his first of many arrests; he was imprisoned and tortured, managing to escape and flee to Athens.

In Athens, Theodorakis began to study classical mu-

1. George Giannaris, *Mikis Theodorakis, Music and Social Change*, 1972, Praeger Publishers, Forward by Mikis Theodorakis.



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Greek hero and composer Mikis Theodorakis, speaking against the EU memorandum in front of the University of Athens in June 2011.

sical composition, trying to create a modern Classical music uniquely Hellenic. His conception was not music for the workers to rouse them to action, but, in fact, the first effort to educate a Greek population that had never been exposed to Classical music. Therefore, he saw as his mission, the task of bringing the Greek people through a process where they could not only understand and appreciate great Classical music, but understand their own historical and cultural relationship to that music as well.

At the same time he joined the E.A.M., the largest of the resistance organizations to the German occupation. For the remainder of the war he took an active part in the resistance while continuing to study Classical composition.

First Symphony in Prison

In 1945 the Second World War came to an end, but the occupation of Greece did not. A British-controlled puppet government was immediately installed, backed

by the British Army, and the Greek Civil War (1945-48) began. Tens of thousands of Greek resistance fighters were arrested and placed in British-run concentration camps.

But this did not deter Theodorakis from his political activities; he spent these years either in hiding or in prison camps, was arrested several times, and was severely tortured. Nonetheless, he struggled to continue his passion for musical composition. His first symphony was composed on the notorious prison island of Makronissos. It was also during these years that he became interested in Greek folk music.

With the end of the Greek Civil War, Theodorakis returned to his musical activity full time, but by 1963, the struggle for liberty in Greece began again. In 1963, Grigoris Lambrakis, a socialist deputy of the Greek parliament, was murdered under circumstances that left no doubt that high officials of the police, army and government were involved. Although Theodorakis had never taken an active role in party politics up to this



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Theodorakis in 1961, around the time he entered his active political career.

point, he was convinced to stand for election. Elected a deputy of the United Left Party in 1964, he was also made president of the Lambrakis Youth Movement (Lambrakides).

One thing Theodorakis has always understood is that Greek people tend to have very powerful historical memory, a memory that spans millennia—and, most certainly, more than the last century. This includes the liberation of Greece from the Ottoman Empire, a struggle which itself took almost of a century of struggle to complete. Then World War I began, followed almost immediately by the Greco-Turkish war that ended in catastrophe for Greece. This was followed by World War II, the British-orchestrated and bitter civil war, and a British-imposed seven-year military dictatorship spanning the 1960s and 1970s.

The undercurrent of these developments was the continued British imposition on Greece, of a generally hated Hanover Monarchy. The Hanovers are the same royal house of that genocidal maniac Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, (whose father was Greek nobility) and were thrown out of the country after the fall of the Colonels' dictatorship.

‘De Vulgari Eloquentia’

For Theodorakis, the Greek poets of the second half of the Nineteenth and first half of the Twentieth Century took on the same task, in terms of the Greek language, when they fought to write literature and poetry in vernacular, or demotic, Greek. At the time Greece was oppressed by a synthetic Greek called *Katharevousa*, created by academics after the Greek revolution as a “reformed” Greek, and used by the reactionary monarchy as yet another form of cultural oppression. These poets sought to take the vernacular instead, and educate it through poetry so that the language and the people could understand and express new and profound ideas.

Of course, Theodorakis knew this fight very well and began a study of its musical dimension, leading him to a study of traditional folk music. He discovered its roots in Byzantine music, but the lyrics of that music had become trivial and banal.

The contemporary Greek folk song of the mid-century had one great defect: It was unbalanced. The more passionate and profound was the music, the more banal the text. My first efforts were directed, therefore, towards righting this imbalance. Poetry was without any doubt the most highly developed of Greek Arts; what, therefore could be simpler than the association of these two great achievements of Greek modernity: poetry and popular music?

Commenting on the effect this type of composition had on his Greek listeners, he said in an interview in 2004:

Don't forget, for Greeks to listen and to sing the words of great poets in their everyday life, was and emphatically remains a serious/important step in the conquest by a whole nation, of high culture/art, purely neo-Hellenic in content, character and form.

And again, in another comment:

People don't listen with their ears, they listen with their imagination. If they have one...[I]t looks as though at that time, the Greek *laos* (people) did have imagination, sensitivity, the

thirst for the new and a focus on historical memory.

The Ballad of Matthausen

Theodorakis' emphasis on composing songs, goes to the heart of his conception of the voice as the most important instrument, something he began to appreciate when, as a young man, he heard for the first time Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with its chorus.

It is at this time, after the civil war, that Theodorakis composed a unique series of song cycles, using modern Greek poetry: *Epitaphios*, *Archipelagos*, *Epiphania*, *Mikres Kykliades*, to name a few. What makes these works so unique is that they were all composed by poets who had fought against the pre-war British-installed Metaxas dictatorship, or in the resistance against the Nazi invasion, or the resistance to the post-War occupation. These include Yiannis Ritsos, who began his poetic career in demonstrations against the Metaxas dictatorship. And the Greek poet/diplomat, Giorgos Seferis, who was awarded the Nobel Prize "...for his eminent lyrical writing, inspired by a deep feeling for the Hellenic world of culture."²

But perhaps one of the most emblematic of his works at this time was *The Ballad of Mauthausen* cycle, in which he put to music a poetic cycle composed by Iakovos Kambanellis, a Greek poet, playwright, screenwriter, lyricist, novelist and survivor of the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp. [Here](#) is one of the performances of this cycle sung by Maria Farantouri.

Macrocosm and Microcosm

In 1964 Theodorakis presented to the Greek public his dream of a rapprochement between the two sides who had fought the civil war, in the form of an opera, *The Song of the Dead Brother*.

But by April of 1967, the British- and U.S.-backed military dictatorship took control of Greece. One of the first acts of the new regime was to place a ban on Theodorakis' work. Theodorakis went underground, issuing an appeal for opposition to the regime. Soon after, he was elected president of the first opposition organization (The Patriotic Front). In hiding, and later imprisoned and tortured once again, he continued to

compose. International pressure for his release mounted, and he was allowed to leave for Paris in 1970.

In an interview just given to the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* June 23, Theodorakis was asked whether music can harmonize human and even political relations. He replied:

Music is a bridge. It voices the desire of man for society. Humans live in totally different, often far-away regions, countries, continents. The overwhelming majority of them will never become acquainted with each other, never talk with each other, know little about the other. But exactly these humans can all listen to the same music and love it. We have thousands of such bridges, music is only one of them. Unfortunately, there are also bridges that are not crossed. But through the times, a few outstanding personalities—philosophers, musicians, painters, writers—have always been kind of the universal currency of human culture and communication, with their voices.

And he had said:

I believe that Art was the only power that could create within us a microcosm in perfect parallel with the Cosmos. It could transfer the laws that define Universal Harmony, inside us. It could make each one of us miniature solar, and huge astral systems. So that each one of us can be tuned in accordance to the Space that surrounds us. So that our inner harmony can be attuned to the Global Harmony, and so that we can become living molecules of the one and only Harmony. This completion of ours, for me, corresponds with the supreme goal of life. Otherwise, we are just sweepings that move here and there in the winds of life until we turn into dust.³

3. Translation of speech "Universal Harmony, On the occasion of the international interdisciplinary symposium "Music and Universal Harmony" in honour of Mikis Theodorakis," 10 March 2006, Heraklion, Crete, 2006.

2. Presentation speech by Anders Osterling, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy.