

**The Byzantine tradition converse with the Greek modern poetry in the
work of Mikis Theodorakis**

**Βυζαντινή παράδοση και νεοελληνική ποίηση συνδιαλέγονται στο έργο του Μίκη
Θεοδωράκη**

Dr. Kalliopi Stiga

Faculty of Musicology, University Lumière-Lyon II, France;
College/Lyceum of Kea, Cyclades, Greece

It was on 20.4.1942, Holy Friday, in the Occupation, where in the Orthodox church of Santa Barbara in the city of Tripolis, Mikis Theodorakis presented for the first time the “*Troparion of Kassiani*”, choral work in four-voice male choir, based on the lyrics of Kassiani, that “*single memorable Byzantine female poet*” according to the eminent German Byzantinist K. Krumbacher. It was then that Mikis Theodorakis, the most important living Greek composer, was seeking God through the sacred texts of the Orthodox Christian religion – “*the Old Testament with Job, the Psalms of David and Solomon*” - and tried to define “*the Ideal. In other words, the ‘cosmic center’ which is located deep within us and yet very far, because it is the Law of the Universe (‘Cosmos’) - the Beginning and the End.*”

The initiation of Theodorakis in the traditions of the Orthodox Christian faith and worship had begun from a very early age. It was his grandmother from his mother keen, named Stamatia Poulaki, who was from Smyrna and was often singing Byzantine hymns. It was her, the person who would “*communicate the grandson with the charm of the holy mass which brings together all the different Greek worlds into a unit inherited from Byzantium*”. In his book, “*The Suitors of Penelope*” Theodorakis, states that:

“Just like his little friends and according to tradition, he knew about music from the Byzantine psalms he learned from his grandmother. She must, however have been a good teacher because as people say, since he was seven years of age Mikis was singing like a priest.”

Hence, it was no wonder that at the time between 1940-1943, Theodorakis, who since the age of 12 gave serious indications of his composing genius by setting poems of Solomos, Palamas, Valaoritis and others to music- those works were included in his collection “*40 Songs for children*”-, he composed ecclesiastic choral works such as “*Ecclesiastic Cantatas*” for choir (AST 8) in Byzantine poetry or “*Hymn to God*” for a four-voice choir accompanied

by harmonium (AST 10) in poetry of Saint Gregory the Theologian by adaptation of Gregory Konstantinopoulos.

With this work (*"Hymn to God"*) as well as the *"Symphony n. 1"*, which followed, Theodorakis expressed *"the search for a new center of reference, the closest and most relevant from the abstract ideal and universal."* His drift towards Marxism had begun, *"and although he was captivated by the church, he realized its duplicity and understood its failure to fulfill the utopian ideas it preaches and to address the immediate human problems."* Thus, *"he came to his own understanding of Christianity as a sacrifice and debt"* and has since admitted it as the sole body of the message of Love: *"the preaching of love and sacrifice -all humanitarian- it has been expressed by the Christ, whom I accept as a spiritual moral-leader"*, while he acknowledges Marxism as an expression of social justice. In the first volume of his five-volume autobiography *"The Roads of Archangel"*, the composer refers to the following: *"In 'Symphony No. 1' which ends in late January 1945, the search for God, as the cosmic center, after passing through the spirit of Darkness and the spirit of Light, leads to the recognition of God in the person of the worker."*

A combination of the above, leads Theodorakis to the foundation of his own worldview, the *"Theory of Universal Harmony"*:

- *"Love and justice are the basic ingredients of Universal Harmony"*
- *God is the conceptual center of Universal Harmony, from which the Law of Nature and Music originate"*

In addition he sets *"the religious sentiment as the Grand Awe (Mega Deos) in front of Zero and Infinity"* and he believes that *"our identification with Modern Mythology is in fact a religious attitude, since modern mythical heroes follow a prescribed course and carry the fate of mankind. The gift of life to them is Passion and their profit is Death."*

Thus, as revealed through many of his works, excluding of course those that are purely of religious inspiration such as the aforementioned ones and the most recent: *"Missa Greca"* (1982-1983) in poetry of John the Chrysostom and *"Requiem; Mass for the deceased 'dedicated in memory of the dead of the Kalavrita slaughter"* (1983-1984) in poetry of John the Damascene, to Theodorakis *"there is no intersection between the mundane and the sacred and neither is belief in conflict with the secularity"* and this is reflected both in poetry and in music.

Is there better proof than the *"Epitaphios"*, the work that has been a milestone in both the career of Mikis Theodorakis and the musical life of Greece?

This is the setting to music by Mikis Theodorakis, in 1958, of the homonymous poetic work of Yannis Ritsos. In this work the composer has launched the “*movement of the folk song*” and has laid the foundations for the Greek “*cultural revolution*” of the 60’s, according to the standards of the “*socialist cultural revolution*”.

For the work, whose original title was “*Lament*”, the poet Yannis Ritsos (1909-1990, Lenin Prize for Peace 1977) was inspired by a photograph published in *Rizospastis* journal of May 10, 1936 showing of a mother dressed in black, kneeling in the middle of the street, torn apart next to the lifeless body of her murdered by the security forces son during a labor demonstration. Written in *iambic fiftener*, it contains 62 couplets in its final version, which have generated 20 songs. The title of the work refers directly to the Holy Friday and the lament of the Virgin Mary in the tomb of Christ (which in Greek is called ‘*Epitaphios*’). In this way, the poet wished to give the work, first of all, a wide dimension and to emphasize the global importance of the death of young worker. In the case of “*Epitaph, Lament of Mary*”, the grief for the death of the Son is reflected in the rapture and hope that the death of God’s human nature will give life to all people. In the case of “*Epitaphios*” by Ritsos, the deep pain of a humble single mother, a simple woman of the people, is externalized spontaneously and expresses a unique patience and an unshakable belief in justice, an agonistic spirit! The decision to continue the fight of her son’s story comes from the history of Greek people and the tradition of continuing the struggle of the dead from their mothers or sisters:

*My son, what Fate has destined you and what Fate was my doom to kindle
such bumming grief, such fire inside my breast?*

My sweet lad, you have not been lost, you live inside my veins.

My son, flow deep into all our veins and stay forever alive.

(Yannis Ritsos - Translation: Amy Mims)

Mikis Theodorakis set to music 8 songs from the poetry collection, wanting first to express the unspeakable suffering of the mother for the early death of her son and to raise the symbol of “*Greek mother*”, worthy witness of courage and mental strength. The eight songs of the cycle are: 1) “*Where did my boy fly away?*”, 2) “*Your sweetly scented lips*”, 3) “*On a day in may*”, 4) “*My star you've set*”, 5) “*You were kind*”, 6) “*Whenever you stood near the window*”, 7) “*If only I had the immortals' potion*”, 8) “*My sweet lad you have not been lost*”. The influence of Byzantine music, of demotic and popular Greek music is obvious and almost “*essential*” from the very same poetic text. Examples include the frequent use of repetition of the same note at the beginning of a melodic phrase – a technique which is found both in

Byzantine music and in folk music (e.g.1, in the song “*Where did my boy fly away?*”), the use of rhythm in 9 / 8 of the *zeimbekiko* dance (e.g.2 in the song “*On a day in may*”), and the use of the *bouzouki* as a key interpretative instrument.

A few years later, the *bouzouki* along with another traditional Greek musical instrument, the *dulcimer* (*santouri*), were incorporated, and even at a leading role, in the western symphony orchestra for the first time. It was the year 1964, when Mikis Theodorakis himself is the director of “*Axion Esti*” in its first presentation. This is the first metasymphonic work of Mikis Theodorakis and the unique “*popular oratorio*” of the composer who, in his quest for convergence of savant with popular music, he has introduced this new musical form in the contemporary world music literature.

Based on the homonymous poetic work of the Greek poet O. Elytis, (1911-1996, Nobel Prize 1979) the “*Axion Esti*” is a hymn to freedom. According to the first biographer of Mikis Theodorakis, the Australian musicologist Gail Holst, the “*Axion Esti*” is “*probably the only project in modern Greek poetry that takes epic dimensions, apart from Kazantzakis’s Odyssey. It is a difficult and complicated poem. Its structure and language are based on the mass of the church. It is a pagan glorification of the sensual world of antiquity, and at the same time a summary of the tragic history of modern Greece in the Second World War and in the Civil War*”. The poet manages, through the epopee of the Second World War and the Civil War, to glorify the eternity and the poetry of Greece both as landscape and concept:

Intelligible sun of Justice and you, glorifying myrtle,

Do not I implore you, do not forget my country!

More specifically, this magnificent poetic work is divided into three parts, which refer to the Christian tradition: I. *The Genesis*, II. *The Passion*, III *The Glorification (Axion Esti)*, “*while on the internal structure there are three different elements: the narrative, the ‘anthem (Hymns)’ and the choral. For the first, the poet uses the prose. For the second, free verse and for the third, metric verse*”. The composer uses, respectively, “*the narrator, who reads the text, the ‘Psaltis’ on ‘Hymns’ and the popular singer for the chorus*”. The addition of the second singer ‘*the Psaltis*’, allowed the composer, according to what he says in his analysis of the work, “*to determine the exact character of the music that he was meant to interpret. It was a music grounded in both the folk and the Byzantine tradition*”. We consider unnecessary our further reference to the influence of Byzantine music (use of Byzantine music Tones – *echos*-, e.g. the opening sentence of “*Axion Esti*” based on Byzantine Fourth Tone (*ήχος Δ*’) and demotic music (use of music rhythms- *tsamikos* rhythm- and traditional instruments-

santouri, guitar, percussion- (e.g.3) in the choral song “*Temples with the sky’s scheme*”) in setting to music the work, since a detailed analysis has already been published, by the composer himself in his book *Poetry setting to Music (vol. 3)*, by Gail Holst in her book “*Mikis Theodorakis: Myth and Politics in Contemporary Greek music*” as well as by George Giannaris in his book *Poetry set to Music*.

Moreover, as detailed by the composer himself in the annex to his book “*Music for the Masses*” there are many examples of his work where the influence of Byzantine music is evident. For example, (e.g.4) : a) the use of a melodic part from the Byzantine hymn “*The beauty of your virginity (I oreotita tis parthenias sou)*” in the songs: “*If only I had the immortals potion*” from the aforementioned song cycle “*Epitaphios*” and “*Margarita Magiopoulos*” in lyrics by Iakovos Kambanellis from the song cycle “*Magical City*”.

However, we consider of particular interest, the two works that have been composed by Theodorakis between 1980 and 1982: those are “*Symphony n. 3*” and “*Liturgy n. 2*”.

The “*Symphony n. 3*” for mezzo soprano, chorus and orchestra in four parts, is considered by the composer as “*a work of a lifetime*” since its first draft was dated 1939, its first presentation was made in 1982 at the Symphony Festival Komische Oper of Berlin, and it was presented in its final form in 1992 by the Symphony Orchestra and Choir of ERT in Athens Concert Hall. Based on the poem “*The Mad Mother*” of D. Solomos, in part on the “*Polis*” by Constantine Cavafy and three Byzantine hymns of Holy Friday, the “*Symphony n. 3*” can be regarded as an expression of “*eternal and timeless Greece*”. At a musical level the significance of the work is that Theodorakis has managed to “*combine harmoniously and to balance two sonic worlds: the tonal and the modal with the atonal or the polytonal of tetrachord type*”. Moreover, as this is the only work of Theodorakis in the third part of which pure hymns of the Holy Friday are listened, namely “*My Sweet Spring (O Glyki mou Ear)*”, “*Life in the Tomb (I Zoi En Tafo)*” and “*Axion Esti*”, the composer believes that “*he has fulfilled the heaviest debt to what he considers the inexhaustible source of music - and not only of music – but also of memory: the Byzantine tradition*”.

As regards “*Liturgy n. 2; For Children killed at war*”, it was composed in 1982 and is based on the transcription of all choral songs from the cycle “*Lyrice*” by poetry of Tassos Livaditis and some other songs in lyrics by the composer himself. The songs are: 1) *Vespers*, 2) *Cherubic to the brotherhood of rain*, 3) *The prayer of the wind*, 4) *Psalm for the holy city*, 5) *Lament of rain*, 6) *Saint Che*, 7) *Psalm for San Music*, 8) *The day of revelation*, 9) *The Holy Mother*, 10) *Alleluia ‘Kalamatiano’ for the partisans martyrs*, 11) *Child aren’t you*

speaking, 12) Gloria, 13) Matutinal; Psalm to Love. It is more than obvious that “it is a ‘mundane liturgy’ where the ‘Saints’ are innocent children, victims of the politics of the Princesses of our time. Three of the most tried people of our era, Jews, Palestinians and Latin Americans, are symbolized by Anne Frank and the anonymous persons of Ibrahim and Emiliano. Che is a symbol of the last revolutionary ideologues, who sacrificed surely full of honest and pure love for others and above all for the innocent children of the world”. At a musical level, the only melodic vein of Mikis Theodorakis is revealed throughout the whole work, while “the often purely harmonic musical language on the style of Catholic’s Church Chorales or of the Orthodox’s Church Cherubic” also reveals the composer’s close relationship with the church music, both Byzantine and Western.

Finally, we consider it appropriate to emphasize that the dialectical relationship between the Byzantine tradition and modern Greek poetry in the work of Mikis Theodorakis, is only one of the key tools of the composer in his quest for the convergence of the savant with the popular music (there is an extensive reference in my doctoral thesis entitled "Mikis Theodorakis: le chantre du rapprochement de la musique savante et de la musique populaire", which was submitted at the University Lumière-Lyon 2, in November 2006).