

The Epic-Lyric Melody of Mikis Theodorakis: An Original Melodic Phenomenon?

Annotation

“The asset of Mikis Theodorakis is his beautiful melodies; this is undeniable. Besides, it is, thanks to his sublime melodies that German musicians adore him...” testified Mikis Theodorakis’ muse, his main interpreter, Maria Farantouri, during our interview on January 28, 2002.

Indeed, the plurality and the diversion of the theodorakian melodies could not but intrigue our curiosity: how did they come about? How have they been treated by the composer? Which are their specific characteristics? Why are they often characterized as ‘epic-lyric’ melodies? Is the epic-lyricism of the melodies connected with the poetic text by which the composer has been inspired?

Influenced both by the rich Greek music tradition which has its roots in Ancient Greece and Byzantium and by the European Occidental music, Theodorakis’ melodies convey, at the same time, elements of the occidental lyricism and oriental epic ones.

Thus, the aim of this article is, through the music-poetic analysis of specifically chosen works by Theodorakis such as the cycles of song *Arcadias (I-X)*, the trilogy *Lyrika-Lyrikotera-Lyrikotata*, the cycles of song *Cities (A-D)* or *The Ballad of Mauthausen*, to define the ‘epic-lyric melody’ by highlighting its specific characteristics and to explain its originality. Additionally, the hidden power of the theodorakian melody, thanks to which Theodorakis’ works are often used as “a tool of struggle”, will be revealed.

Keywords: 20th century, Greek music, Mikis Theodorakis, epic-lyric melody.

The eminent contemporary Greek composer, politician, thinker and academician, Mikis Theodorakis (b. 1925) has been characterised, among others, as an “excellent melodist” (Holst 1980: 22). During our interview on 28 January 2002, Mikis Theodorakis’ muse and main interpreter Maria Farantouri testified:

“The asset of Mikis Theodorakis is his beautiful melodies; this is indisputable. Besides, it is, thanks to his sublime melodies that German musicians adore him...” (Stiga 2006: 1308)

Born in Chios, with origins in Crete and Asia Minor, Theodorakis was raised listening to traditional Greek music, which has its roots in Ancient Greece and Byzantium. Later, exiled on the Island of Ikaria during the Greek Civil War, he was initiated into the Greek popular music. Additionally, thanks to his studies at the Athens Conservatory and at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Paris, he was deeply influenced by occidental classical music. The fusion of the characteristic elements of Greek traditional and popular music and of occidental classical music was inevitable and it is obvious in his works.

Besides Theodorakis asserts that he is influenced in particular by Igor Stravinsky and Béla Bartók, as far as the use of ‘national musical material’ is concerned. In his book *Where can I find my soul? – Music*, he wrote about it:

“It is normal that every generation of composers is sown in the ground left by the previous one. In my case, the reference to Stravinsky and Bartók covers one part of me: the part of our common heritage based on musical folklore with particular personality: Russian, Hungarian, and Greek. However, as far as I am concerned, the main part of my work is originated in my need to express dramatic situations. I would say that the tragedy constituted my artistic ideal and I am happy that I am completing the dream of my life by composing three lyrical tragedies (operas), *Medea*, *Electra*, and *Antigone*.” (Theodorakis, *Where can I find my soul? – Music*, 2002: 260)

In parallel, Theodorakis admits that he has also been profoundly influenced by Dmitri Shostakovich, concerning the composing of his lyrical tragedies (operas). In his interview in March 2000 to the Greek musicologist Ioulia Lazaridou-Elmaloglou, he states:

“Perhaps the influence of Shostakovich was deeper, as it has to do with my ‘symphonist self’ whose archetype was the Beethovenian symphony which, in my opinion, was expressing the spirit of ancient tragedy in music. I have to say that the ancient Greek tragic poets already represented for me, the superior aesthetic conquest compared with everything else in the intellectual and artistic world...”

Shostakovich was showing me a contemporary way of continuing the musical tragedy. His influence on me has also to do with the fact that he was representing the Soviet art in an epoch that for the Greek leftists of the civil war everything which was Soviet took the dimensions of a mythical symbol. But even in the beginning I understood the limits of my admiration for him and consequently of his influence on me.” (Lazaridou-Elmaloglou 2004: 51)

Thus, the fact that “throughout his career as a composer, Theodorakis has never given up on analyzing the demotic, byzantine and popular music and on using his rich musical past as a source of melodic inspiration”

(Holst 1980: 45), without at the same time moving away from occidental music tradition, is evident in the totality of his work. Indicatively, we mention that:

- in the *First Symphony*, Theodorakis is approaching an impressive level of orchestral writing based on the model of Shostakovich (Athens Music Hall-Giannopoulos 1999: 44)
- in the *Feast of Assi-Gonia ...*, “he uses for the first time the Greek folklore as musical material” (Ladis 2001: 42)
- in *Oedipus the Tyrant*, “he associates successfully the monophonic byzantine melos to the polyphonic technique of the Occident” (Ladis 2001: 42–43)
- in *Suite No 1* and in the last movement of the Piano Concerto as well, he uses the piano as a percussion instrument according to Stravinsky’s model:
 “The Finale-Allegro, starts again with the piano which gives us by itself a foretaste about the general ambiance of the movement and its intensity. Themes, melodic elements are presented and repeated from the one music stand to the other in order to arrive at the piano which- treated by Theodorakis as a percussion instrument just as Stravinsky was doing- is introducing new tones with different energy ...” (Wagner 2002: 136)
- in the soundtrack of the film *Electra*, he associates the sounds of typical Greek traditional music instruments with those of symphonic instruments:
 “In that score he is not so much interested in composing melodies or motives as in introducing themes and melodies to an orchestral composition which is accelerating the scenic and film action and intensifying the dimensions of the tragic conflict. In order to achieve its aim, he uses new sound combinations and he makes his composition much more original by using typical Greek music instruments, such as the santouri, the clarinet or the baglama. Thus, he creates an ambiance which reflects the austerity of nature and the cruelty of the feelings and the tortures of the tragic heroes. He is consequently denuding the essence of the Greek drama.” (Wagner 2002: 164)
- In the third movement of the *Symphony No 3*, he uses three important melodies of the Holy Friday:
 “... we have to underline the amazing impression of the ‘bell’s sound’ incorporated by Theodorakis into the ‘Hymn to Peter of EPON’, in the most crucial moment of the third movement. His composition is based on the three most important byzantine melodies of the Holy Friday, that is to say of the Epitaph Lament; at that specific moment, he also uses a verse by Kavafis: ‘There is no boat for you, there is no route...’ and he adds a verse of his own as well: ‘We are all together encircled...’” (Wagner 2002: 353)
- In the soundtrack of the film *Zorba the Greek*, in the ballet *Zorba il Greco* and in the *Suite of Zorba*, he establishes a new ‘artificial’ traditional dance *the syrtaki* (which is a mixture of hassapikon and zeibekikon dances) (Wagner 2002: 164). The music of these three works “expresses the inexhaustible hope” (Wagner 2002: 395). Thanks to that music, Theodorakis
 “achieved the goal of one of his biggest musical projects: to associate the symphonic, the popular and the Cretan music with such a mastery that the result looks purely natural, as he conceived it ‘not as an antithesis but as a synthesis’. Besides he is ‘Cretan, Greek and European’ and through that work, the Greek popular music makes its official and spectacular entry to the occidental symphonic music.” (Wagner 2002: 394)

The plurality and the diversity of the theodorakian melodies which sometimes appear as a song and sometimes as a symphony, a soundtrack or an operatic aria, could not but intrigue our curiosity. However, in the frame of that paper we will refer to the song melodies, which occupy in any case the biggest part of Theodorakis’ work.

As since his adolescence Theodorakis has already resorted to the words in order to express his innermost thoughts, his preoccupations, his joys and his sorrows, Poetry constitutes his principal source of inspiration. He chooses the poems which he sets to music according to their originality, to the messages that they convey, to the emotions that they evoke in the soul of the people. The composer himself mentions:

“There is a determinant element which guides me to one or another pathway of composition: the sensitivity of the public. There is an ambiance, an anticipation in the people which you can capture only with the antennas of the ‘soul’. If the reflexions of your soul are correct, then you are able to capture the generalised atmosphere which is covering that anticipation under the surface of the situations.” (Holst 1980: 258)

However, what are the components of the procedure which results in the ‘setting to music’? In the case of Theodorakis, we can distinguish three different situations:

- a. From the poetry to the melody,
- b. From the melody to the poetry,
- c. Simultaneous creation of the poetry and of the melody.

As far as the second case is concerned, that is to say **from the melody to the poetry**, we think that the explanation given by the composer is sufficient according to which some poets like Nikos Gatsos or Tasos Livaditis “liked to write their verses based on given music. Thus, the well-known songs *My Mother, my Virgin Mary* and *Drapetsona* from the cycle of songs *City A'* and the songs of the cycle *Lyrika* came about due to the conception of the Livaditis poetry based on given music” (Stiga 2006: 1250).

As far as the third case is concerned, that is to say **the simultaneous creation of poetry and melody**, Theodorakis takes refuge in it especially during the difficult periods of his life – when he was imprisoned or exiled. Besides, it was then that such works as *The Sun and the Time* (1967), *The Songs of Andreas* (1968), *Arcadia I* (1968), *Arcadia VI* (1969), *Arcadia X* (1969), among others, were created.

It is worth mentioning the conditions of the creation of the cycle of songs *The Sun and the Time*.

Theodorakis wrote the poetry and the music of this work, in August and September 1967, when he was continuously tortured and was waiting to be killed in cell No 4 at the police headquarters, where he was imprisoned after his arrest by the police of the junta. He refers to those conditions in his texts:

“The previous nights I was awake with my back stuck on the wall, waiting from one moment to the other, to be taken for a new torture or for execution. All my being has been marked by the expectation of death. As the time was passing insistently and cruelly, I was imagining clearly the frame of the last instant. The morning sky had a deep blue colour. ... with the advent of the new day, when the sun was getting on me, the life was starting again. The life was beating me. ... I am not a poet, but when verses started to hammer on my mind, I felt that words can be dressed in blood, that they can liberate me...” (Theodorakis, *To be enchanted and to get entranced*, 2002: 9)

Finally, as for the first case, that is to say **from the poetry to the melody**, which dominates the musical creation of Theodorakis, we think that it is better to refer back to the words of the composer who in his five-volume autobiography *The paths of the Archangel*, wrote:

“... since the beginning of my turn to music, I have not done anything but setting to music the poems that I liked to read and recite. I will allow those who wish to laugh, but I will say again that when I read a poem sometimes I ‘hear’ and sometimes I do not ‘hear’ its music. I adore Kavafis but I have never heard even one minimal melodic sound through the emotional-psychological-mental upheaval caused in me when I read his poems.” (Theodorakis, *The paths of Archangel*, 1986, Vol. 1: 135–136)

Thus, his own verses and the verses of Greek or foreign poets as well of Elytis, Ritsos, Eluard, Lorca, Neruda among others are transformed into melodies thanks to his inexhaustible inspiration, they convey his political thoughts and his artistic ideals from one generation to the other and are registered in the collective memory of the people.

However, how did these melodies come about? How were they treated by the composer?

Only the composer could answer that question which was posed to him during our interview on 9 June 2001:

“It is a very strange feeling that I cannot describe; that means that it is not a cerebral procedure. ... Suddenly when I read a poem, it is immediately transformed into music, in seconds, I do not have the time to think, from the moment that I read a poem till the moment that it shakes me, the mating is immediate, that is to say the mating and the birth, which does not happen in nature, because between the mating and the birth there is some time, on the contrary in this case these procedures are simultaneous ... Which means that my song is composed in the time of its duration; if the song lasts 3 min that means that it has been composed in 3 min and it comes about only one time! The creation of symphonic music is different; in that case, you can explore your initial material. The song is born like a child...” (Stiga 2006: 1092–1251)

The description of Theodorakis concerning the setting to music of the *Epitaph* based on the poetry by Yannis Ritsos, is characteristic:

“How did the Epitaph arrive to my hands? I do not remember. I started to leaf through it and to read it one more time. It is curious, but when poetry has to ‘speak’ to me, then sounds are gushing out impetuously, like the water of a source which comes out of the ground, joyful to have found the power to greet the sky and the light. Fortunately, I had a pencil. I ruled some staves next to the verses and I started to write quickly, just to catch up. I do not remember how many poems I have set to music. Probably twenty...” (Theodorakis, *Where can I find my soul? – Music*, 2002: 174)

The same happened, according to the composer, when he set to music *Grecity (Romiossyni)* by Yannis Ritsos as well:

“...it was the Epiphany, in 1966, somebody’s hand picked up and put on the piano the forgotten manuscripts. That day, a clash with the Police in Pireaus had taken place: my cruel beating and my harassment had a deep influence on me. So much so, that when I read the first verse: ... ‘These trees cannot fit in less sky...’, despite the fact that I was dirty with mud and blood, I composed ‘Romiossyni’ at one sitting...” (Theodorakis, *Where can I find my soul? – Music*, 2002: 176–177)

In fact, Theodorakis says that in the case of the songs, the ‘birth’ of the melody is a spontaneous and intuitive action, a non-‘thoughtful’ one. The question is: does the melody that gushes out, fit absolutely the prosody of the poetic text? According to him, Theodorakis is adapting afterwards the ‘new born’ melody, in order to respect the poetic text:

“I absolutely respected the poet. When I was deciding to set to music a poem (when I liked it) which had a word that did not suit me, out of respect to the poet, I was trying not to change it. I always started with the principle ‘that if the poet wanted it that way, it means that this is his feeling, this is it!’ Who am I to change it in order to fit my music?” (Stiga 2002: 1250)

Furthermore, after our attempt to explore Theodorakis’ principles of music composition, we will try to define the specific characteristics of the ‘theodorakian melody’ and to explain why it is often characterised as ‘epic-lyric’ melody.

The particular characteristic of the ‘theodorakian’ melody is that it contains elements coming from byzantine, demotic and popular Greek music which are processed by the composer in conjunction with his own inspiration. At the same time, he associates them with the forms of the occidental music, creating in this way an original neo-Hellenic musical language. More precisely:

a) his melodic language is tonal with modal turns, which helps him to underline the meaning of the verses through the ‘ethos’ of the ancient Greek modes according to the ancient theoreticians of music the ‘ethos’ is referred to as “the expressive character of each mode and to the fact that they could inspire the soul of the audience” (Reinach 1926, translation 1999: 77). For instance, the plaintive myxolydian mode dominates in the song *Suicide of a Month Reservist* of the cycle of songs *Lyrikotera* (1994–95) in order to express the deep sadness for the *Suicide of a Month Reservist*.

MIKIS THEODORAKIS
 10. ΑΥΤΟΚΤΟΝΙΑ ΕΦΕΛΡΟΥ ΜΗΝΟΣ
 LE SUICIDE D' UN MOIS RESERVISTE
 (Τα Λυρικώτερα)
 (Lyrikotera)
 cycle de chansons

Example 1. Theodorakis M., Lyrikotera, *Suicide of a Month Reservist*, mm. 1–7

Respectively, the majestic and brave *dorian* mode is used in the song *Sorrow Revealed* of the same cycle of songs to express both the ‘revealed sorrow’ and the composure of his beloved: “Apparently you are not scared...”

14
 Δε - φο - βί - σαι
 De - fo - va - se

17
 φαί - νε - ται τῆ νύ - χτα των αγ - γέ - λων
 fe - ne - te ti ni - hta ton a - ge - lon

Example 2. Theodorakis M., Lyrikotera, *Sorrow Revealed*, mm. 15–18

b) the repetition of the same note which refers to the *ison* (= bass drone note) of the byzantine hymns appears often. For instance, the particular characteristics of the ‘theme E’ of the song *The Dream of the Night* from the cycle of songs *Lyrikotata* (1996) are its chromatic melodic line on the one hand and on the other hand, the motive of the accompaniment based on the repetition of the same note in parallel with the melody of the song.

Theme E

28
 τὸ φῶ - ρος εἶ - παρ - εἶ - παρ
 ti - fo - ras ei - pa - rei - pa - rei

31
 ἡ - ἴ - ε - ρα σου τὴ - λιο - σαν
 hi - i - era sou ti - lio - san

Example 3. Theodorakis M., Lyrikotata, *The Dream of the Night*, mm. 31–32

c) the frequent use of odd rhythms (in 3, 5, 7, 9...) which characterise the Greek demotic music. For instance, the rhythm of *ballos* (in 2/4 $\text{♩} \text{♩} \text{♩} \text{♩}$ in the song *The Immigrant* from the cycle of songs *City A'*),

ΜΕΤΑΝΑΣΤΗΣ
 Emigrant

τίτλος
 ΧΡΗΣΤΟΣ ΙΟΥ.ΙΟΥ ΜΙΚΗΣ ΘΕΟΔΩΡΑΚΗΣ

92
 κα - ρά - βι ποὺ σὲ κέν - τη - σε ποὺ σὺ - βα - ψε τὰ
 ka - ra - vi pou se ken - ti - se pou su - va - pse ta

Variation A
 ἄσπ - ρα γιὰ νὰ μέ - νει - μα - κρο - ἄ (καί)
 asp - ra gia na me - nei - ma - kro - a (kai)

Example 4. Theodorakis M., *City A'*, *The Immigrant*

the rhythm of *chassapikon* (in 2/5 in the song *The Night is Coming* from the cycle of songs *City B'*)

ΒΡΑΜΙΑΖΕΙ
Evening Deep in Your Eyes

Στίχοι: Α. ΑΠΙΣΤΟΛΟΥΔΟΥ
Μουσική: ΜΙΚΗΣ ΘΕΟΔΩΡΑΚΗ

Introduction

Example 5. Theodorakis M., *City B'*, *The Night is Coming*

and the rhythm of *zébékikon* (in 9/8-slow, in the song *It's not your Fault if I'm Travelling* from the cycle of songs *City D'*).

Πολιτεία Δ'
4. ΔΕΝ ΦΤΑΙΣ ΕΣΥ ΠΟΥ ΤΑΞΙΔΕΥΩ
(Βραχότι, Ιούλιος 1995)

ΜΟΥΣΙΚΗ: Μίκης Θεοδωράκης
ΣΤΙΧΟΙ: Μανώλης Ελευθερίου

Introduction

Example 6. Theodorakis M., *City D'*, *It's not your Fault if I'm Travelling*

Nevertheless, the main singularity of the 'theodorakian melodies' is that some of them are called 'epic-lyric'. The term 'epic-lyric', by definition contradictory, refers to a poetic composition, which combines both the characteristics of the epic and of the lyrical poetry.

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Epinė-lyrinė Mikio Theodorakio melodija: originalus melodinis fenomenas?

Santrauka

„Mikio Theodorakio muzika yra labiausiai vertinama dėl jo nuostabiai gražių melodijų; to neįmanoma paneigti. Beje, būtent dėl tauraus melodijų grožio jo muziką taip mėgsta vokiečių atlikėjai“, – tvirtino kompozitoriaus mūza, nuolatinė jo dainų atlikėja Maria Farantouri, iš kurios 2002 metų gruodžio 28-ąją man teko imti interviu.

Theodorakio melodijų gausa ir įvairovė iš tiesų žadina tyrinėtojo smalsumą: kokios šių melodijų sukūrimo aplinkybės? Kaip jas traktavo pats kompozitorius? Kokie jų būdingieji bruožai? Kodėl jos dažnai apibūdinamos kaip „epinės-lyrinės“ melodijos? Ar melodijų epinį lyriškumą nulėmė kompozitorių įkvėpę poetiniai tekstai?

Theodorakio melodikoje, kurią, viena vertus, maitina turtinga graikų muzikos tradicija, savo istorija siekianti antikinės Graikijos ir Bizantijos laikus, o kita vertus – europinės muzikos įtaka, susipina vakarietiška lyrika ir rytietiškas episkumas.

Straipsnyje pateikiama pasirinktų Theodorakio kūrinių (pirmos dešimt dainų iš ciklo „Arcadia“, trilogija „Ta Lyrika – Ta Lyrikotera – Ta Lyrikotata“, dainų ciklai „Cities“ (A'-D') ir „Mauthauzeno baladė“) muzikinė ir poetinė analizė, kurioje siekiama apibrėžti, kas yra „epinė-lyrinė“ melodija, išryškinti jos būdinguosius bruožus ir paaiškinti originalumą. Kartu stengiamasi atskleisti Theodorakio melodijose slypinčią jėgą, dėl kurios kompozitoriaus kūriniai dažnai pavadinami „kovos ginklais“.