

The “Mikis Theodorakis Phenomenon.” From the Music Score to the After-Concert: A Unique “Channel of Communication”

Abstract. Inspired composer, communist fighter, daring politician, humanist academician, Mikis Theodorakis died at the age of 96 in Athens, on September 2, 2021. A detailed study of his musical work—specific annotations on scores, analyses of works proposed by the composer himself, etc.—can reveal to us the compositional process he followed, but it cannot provide information on the impact of his work on the public or on the “channel of communication” established between the composer and the audience. For this, we have to resort to less conventional research tools such as press articles or interviews. The purpose of this paper is—through unpublished interviews carried out with the composer himself as well as with his most important interpreters—to try to delve into these questions, among others, and highlight the impact of his music on the public as well as this exceptional “communication” between the composer and the audience. Moreover, the socio-political role of the theodorakian work as useful pedagogical material and simultaneously as a peaceful weapon of struggle are underlined. Finally, new alternatives for communicating Mikis Theodorakis’ “musical galaxy” during the post-theodorakian era, in order for it to be preserved and maintained as a landmark of our “cultural heritage,” are proposed.

Keywords: Mikis Theodorakis; Greek composer; music of the 20th–21st centuries; “Theory of Universal Harmony”; “theodorakian music galaxy”; music for the masses; art-song; Greek poetry.

Introduction

It was September 2, 2021, when one of the most famous Greek composers in the world, Mikis Theodorakis, died at the age of 96. The whole world bowed before the remains of the inspired composer, the communist fighter, the daring politician, the humanist academician. The “Union of Peoples” he advocated throughout his life through his original musical work as well as through his relevant writings and speeches, is realized at this last moment. But, how did a simple person manage to do this? Thanks to his intelligence? His temperance? His honesty? His skills? Was he not one of us? Was he special? Was he a “man-phenomenon”?

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the process of creating the unique “channel of communication” that he “built” between his work, himself and audiences all over the world. A detailed study of Theodorakis’ musical work—specific annotations on scores, analyses of works proposed by the composer himself, etc.—can reveal to us the compositional process he followed, but it cannot provide information on the impact of his work on the public. For this, we have to resort to less conventional research tools such as press articles or interviews. Finally, new alternatives for communicating Mikis Theodorakis’ “musical galaxy” during the post-theodorakian era, in order for it to be preserved and maintained as a landmark of our “cultural heritage,” are proposed.

1. From the “Theory of Universal Harmony” to the “Musical Galaxy” of Mikis Theodorakis

It was in 1937, when he was only twelve years old, that Mikis Theodorakis first combined poetic *language* with its musical counterpart, creating his first song *Το καραβάκι* (The small boat) in verses written by an unknown poet. Since then and for more than eighty years, the *Logos* (Poetry), the *Melos* (Music) and the fight for freedom would define his life. Guided by his own cosmo-theory, the *Θεωρία της Συμπαντικής Αρμονίας* (the theory of universal harmony), which he established in 1943, at the age of eighteen, in the midst of the Second World War and while trying to reconcile the principles of Christianity with those of Marxism, he shaped his political activity on the one hand, that is “the utopia of society wanting to partake of the gift of Art,” and on the other, his vision for the creation of a “classless” music.

He believed that:

Art means Freedom. And that is why it is addressed to free people. [and that] If the artist, who is aware of the nature of his work, wants this work to have correct and complete recipients, he should contribute to their release, being free, because only in this way his effort is completed. (Theodorakis 2002: 227)

The achievement of his vision was identified with his struggle for freedom.

Thus, in the early sixties, he led the resurgent cultural and political movement of the “fighting culture” which aimed at the democratization of social life and the deep renaissance of the Greek people through the creation of a classless music, called “music for the masses.”

Considering that the “music for the masses” that “was born from the marriage of the modern Greek popular music with the modern Greek poetry” (Theodorakis 1972: 22) had above all an educational and at the same time a liberating role, he used the concept of musical form to initiate every listener to the high art of music, previously reserved only for the elite. He started with the simplest form which is the song—namely the “art-song”—to reach the opera, passing through new musical forms that were created at the time such as the *cycle of songs*, the *popular oratorio*, the contemporary *popular musical tragedy* or *popular opera*, the *flow-song* (Theodorakis 1972: 24).

The fusion of modern Greek and foreign poetry, which had always been his main source of inspiration, with melos—the melody that is deeply influenced by Byzantine music, Greek demotic and popular music as well as Western European classical music—resulted in the creation of a “United Sound Musical Lyrical Stochastic Universe.” Consisting of more than one thousand songs, music for films, music for ballet, music for ancient and modern theater, choral works, a popular oratorio, a popular opera, flow-songs, chamber music works, symphonies, operas, and a requiem, it constitutes the “musical galaxy” of Mikis Theodorakis.

Ο ΜΟΥΣΙΚΟΣ «ΓΑΛΑΞΙΑΣ» ΤΟΥ ΜΙΚΗ ΘΕΟΔΩΡΑΚΗ

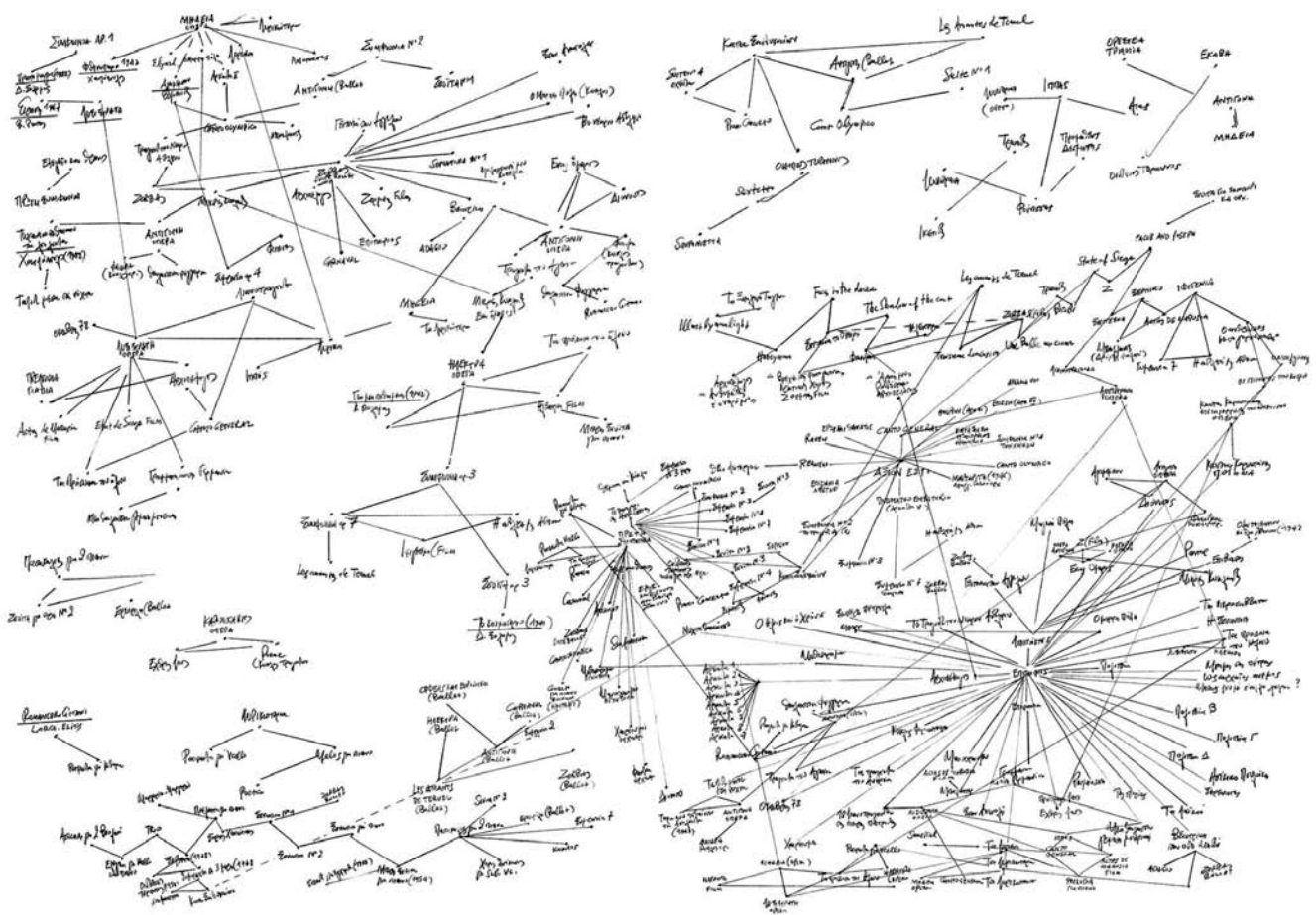


Figure 1. Mikis Theodorakis’ “musical galaxy.”

In my paper “Rhythm and Greekness in the Cities of Mikis Theodorakis” presented within the framework of the 13th international music theory conference: *Principles of Music Composing: Phenomenon of Rhythm* (2013), and in my paper “The Theodorakian Epic-lyric Melody: an Original Melodic Phenomenon?” presented at the 15th international music theory conference *Principles of Music Composing: Phenomenon of Melody* (2015), I referred thoroughly to the two basic structural elements of Theodorakis’ works: rhythm and melody. These two elements constitute the basis of the “channel of communication” formed between the composer and the audience. Thus, from the cycle of songs *Επιτάφιος* (Epitaph) (1958) to the popular opera *Το Τραγούδι του Νεκρού Αδελφού* (The Ballad of the Dead Brother) (1960), from the popular oratorio *Άξιόν Εστί* (Axion

Esti) (1960) to the cycle of songs *Ρωμοσύνη* (Greekness) (1966), from the meta-symphonic work *Πνευματικό Εμβατήριο* (The March of the Spirit) (1969) to *Canto General* (General Song) (1972), from the film music *Ζορμπάς* (Zorba the Greek) (1964) to the opera *Λυσιστράτη* (Lysistrata) (2002), the ensemble of this theodorakian “musical galaxy,” which is an expression of the high humanistic ideals of Peace, Social Justice, Freedom and the Union of Peoples, easily touches a huge audience, immediately becomes its “property” and passes into the collective memory.

However, for the transmission of this precious message all over the world, the contribution of the composer through his writings mainly but also his physical presence, as well as of the interpreters of this various and rich work, was and is necessary.

2. The “Musical Galaxy” embraces the Universe

Studying the scores of works by Mikis Theodorakis, the performer finds, as always, notes and indications relating to interpretation. However, recorded rehearsals—before a concert or in the studio—with Theodorakis on the podium giving instructions to the performers and mainly the short notes—musical analyses of works that the composer himself cites in his various literary texts (books, CD booklet annotations, concert programs, etc.)—are also important. His notes about the place, the period, the conditions in which he composed each work as well as the socio-political context that inspired him each time, are important elements for capturing the “style” of each work by the performer.

As an example, we mention (a) his musical analyses included, among others, in his two-volume book *Το Χρέος* (The Duty/Journal of Resistance), and more specifically the one that refers to the “style” in which the third part of *Άξιον Εστί* (Axion Esti) should be performed:

In the third part of the work, the tsamikos dance dominates. A series of instruments, percussion, piano, santouri, etc. build from measure to measure this characteristic modern Greek dance rhythm. And on this rhythmic-harmonic-orchestral foundation, the Choir develops the purely neo-Byzantine melody for two voices, Primo-Secondo, according to the standards of the Epitaph lament of Holy Friday. Here, however, both the structure of the melody itself and the set of rhythms (polyrhythmic writing dominates) as well as its tempo give it the necessary glorifying character. (Theodorakis 1974: vol. 1, 335)

As another example, we can mention (b) the composer’s notes that preface almost every work in his three-volume book *Μελοποιημένη Ποίηση* (Poetry set to Music) (1997–1999), such as the composer’s explanatory notes on *Συμφωνία Ν.2 «Το Τραγούδι της Γης»* (Symphony No. 2 “The Song of the Earth”) in the second volume of this book:

I consider the Second Symphony (1958–1982) as a sonic mural divided into four parts—four paintings, where the one emerges from the other and all of them have common points of reference. ... For the listener to whom the work is addressed, what matters is the aesthetic-emotional effect. I think that the lyrics of ‘The Song of the Earth’ convey the general psychological-emotional as well as the ideological climate that prevailed in my consciousness and thought at the time of composition. The message seems pessimistic. But within the whole economy of the work, it functions as a cry of despair, perhaps to scare, to enlist even five minutes, before the chaos that international developments have now made clearly visible. (Theodorakis 1998: vol. 2, 228)

However, the contribution to the performance of the interpreter himself of each work is decisive, as he is the one who will activate the “channel of communication” that connects the composer and his work with the audience. Important performers of Theodorakis’ songs with whom we spoke within the framework of our research into Theodorakis’ work, refer to the way in which the composer himself inspired them and influenced their performance. As an example, we mention the testimony of the singer Manolis Mitsias, who referred to the composer’s “intervention” both during a concert and during the recording of the cycle of songs *Πολιτεία Γ’* (City C’):

Mikis undoubtedly intervenes in the performance not only when we are in the studio but also during a concert. Last night I was watching a concert we gave in 1994 in Thessaloniki with *Άξιον Εστί* [Axion Esti] and I remembered that Mikis was singing with me while conducting the orchestra, he was always singing on stage and I remember that in the second verse of the song *Ανοίγω το στόμα μου* [I open my mouth], he was always asking me: ‘What?’ and I was giving the answer that exists in the next verse with more inner strength, with more emphasis and intensity... Mikis always intervenes and fortunately he does; if he didn’t, things would be

quite different. I always wanted his intervention and when we worked on *Πολιτεία Γ'* [City C'] I remember that he always intervened when I sang and that helped me to understand certain things better; there are other things that I have just become aware of after so many years, I have just realized what Mikis really wanted... (Stiga 2006: vol. 3, 1159–1160)

His muse and constant collaborator, Maria Farantouri, confirmed during our interview that “each performance is a mixture of what Mikis transmits to me [her], of what he wants and of my [her] own expression.” (Stiga 2006: vol. 3, 1145)

However, the choice of the performer by the composer was mainly a matter of intuition. During our interview in June 2002, my question was—based on which criteria does he choose the performer of a work each time? Theodorakis answered as follows:

The naturally popular element of the voice and in general of the interpretation of each artist is of a mysterious and therefore indefinable nature. It is not by reflection but by intuition that I always choose my collaborators. (Stiga 2006: vol. 3, 1087)

And he continued:

I can't describe them but there are some performers who shake me up and others who leave me indifferent. I cannot describe what upsets me, but there is something that makes me understand it... the voice influences me, it touches me a lot and I understand that the person can absolutely be related to my music. Of course, I can be wrong sometimes but that's what I'm looking for... I'm trying to understand if the person has a beautiful voice, a soft voice that is outside and far from his sentimental world or if his voice expresses his deepest emotions... (Stiga 2006: vol. 3, 1110)

Equally important in the successful transmission of Theodorakis' musical work to the audience was the choice of the concert venue. Considering that concert halls were usually intended for the presentation of works of classical repertoire destined for an initiated, elitist audience, Theodorakis was the first to introduce in Greece in the 1960s the model of the “popular concert,” which had its roots in the concerts-demonstrations organized by the members of IWW¹ in the beginning of the 20th century in the United States of America, and which could take place in neighborhood squares, stadiums or prestigious theaters... The goal is to be able to transmit the “message” conveyed by the musical work to as many recipients as possible:

Thanks to the popular concert I first wanted to break the barrier of the ban; get closer to the people; in the neighborhoods and in the provinces. But it wasn't just that. I believed that popular music should come out of trendy taverns and nightclubs. I also believed that the composer and the poet should come face to face with their audience. The abandoned, hunted people needed to feel their scholars near them. But we needed also the “breath” of the people. (Theodorakis, as quoted in Flessas 1994: 46)

A series of successful popular concerts were given by Theodorakis and his associates throughout Greece in the years before the dictatorship (1967–1974). During it, his music was banned and he was exiled or imprisoned for a long time, but his work was spread thanks to the large popular concerts organized by his collaborators abroad. After his release and his escape abroad, for almost four years, he toured the whole world and gave numerous concerts in which he internationalized the “Greek problem,” he denounced the Junta and his concerts turned into protest-concerts. The following description is typical:

During his exile abroad, Mikis Theodorakis gave thousands of concerts, almost all over the world, concerts which were accompanied by interviews published in the press or diffused on the radio, by demonstrations, by speeches against the junta diffused on the TV.

There were twenty concerts per month on average for four years. ... He made three tours in Italy, England, Germany. Four in France. ...

In Argentina, more than 20000 people and outside the venue even as many shouted “Greece-Argentina united will defeat the fascists.” At the Caracas stadium in Venezuela, 30000 people cheered for Democracy in Greece. In the dozens of countries he visited, he gathered around the popular orchestra and the voices of Maria Farantouri, Petros Pandis, Antonis Kalogiannis, Maria Dimitriadi, Arja Saijonmaa, more than a million and a half listeners... (Logothetis 2004: 116)

¹ IWW: Industrial Workers of the World, a syndicate founded in 1905 in Chicago, well-known as “wobblies.”

With the fall of the regime of the Colonels and the return of Theodorakis to Greece, popular concerts continued and are a common practice to this day. At the same time, the Ancient Odeon of Herodes Atticus, which was forbidden to him due to his leftist ideology, was granted to him only in 1988, where he performed *Άξιον Εστί* (*Axion Esti*) conducting the orchestra himself. His physical presence, as a conductor, always strengthened the “channel of communication” with the audience.

His strong and proud bearing is unforgettable. So is the wide opening of his arms as if embracing the full orchestra and the whole world when he turned to the audience to encourage them to sing along with the performers. Having experienced, since my early childhood, countless times both the popular concerts and especially the protest-concerts in which Theodorakis was conducting the orchestra as well as the popular concerts of the last decades in honor of the composer, I can confirm that the orchestra, performers and the audience were transformed, thanks to the conducting or simply the physical presence of Theodorakis in a large choral setting. The rhythmic applause of the audience, the spontaneous—sometimes enthusiastic and sometimes more lyrical—singing of the audience at the same time as the performers, the excitement of the audience each time, before the end of the concert, Theodorakis, with a nod, asked the orchestra to play one more song, one more melody upon the verses from the well-known songs (1) *Άρνηση* (*Refuse*) by Georges Seferis from the cycle of songs *Επιφάνεια* (*Epiphany*) (1960) or (2) *Στρώσε το στρώμα σου για δυο* (*Prepare the mattress for the two of us*) by Iakovos Kampanelis over the famous melody from the *Ο Χορός του Ζορμπά* (*The Dance of Zorba*) included on the soundtrack of the film *Ζορμπάς* (*Zorba the Greek*) (1964) to be heard once more, they will be etched forever in my memory and will always give me the same deep emotion.

<p>(1)</p> <p><i>Πάνω στην άμμο την ξανθή γράψαμε τ'όνομά της Ωραία που φύσηξε ο μπάτης και σβήστηκε η γραφή</i></p>	<p>(1)</p> <p>On the golden sand, we wrote her name² How lovely the wind blew and the writing was wiped out.</p>
<p>(2)</p> <p><i>Στρώσε το στρώμα σου για δυο για σένα και για μένα ν'αγκαλιαστούμε απ'την αρχή να'ναι όλ'αναστημένα.</i></p>	<p>(2)</p> <p>Prepare the mattress for the two of us for you and me and let us fall in each other's arms to resurrect it all again.</p>

Regarding this unique “channel of communication,” Maria Farantouri says:

this channel of communication is due to a reciprocal attraction between Mikis and the people ... a strong relationship of love between him and the people, a mysterious and inexplicable relationship. In the case of Theodorakis, this relationship is explained by the truth of his work, he was never cut off from the people, he never followed the model of an artist who creates far from the society. Theodorakis has always been a revolutionary, a fighter, a poet; he was always very close to the people, in the heart of the action, where the events were taking place... (Stiga 2006: vol. 3, 1150)

At the same time, it is obvious that no one can ignore the role of the numerous recordings nor the modern online ways of transmitting theodorakian music in order to maintain this powerful “channel of communication” between the composer, his work and the audience.

Now, in the post-theodorakian era, the protection of the ensemble of his work is, in my opinion, necessary so that it does not become a boon to bad interpreters and other supposedly inadequate scholars. The preservation of the unique “channel of communication” between the performers and the audience and the diligent and unimpeded dissemination of the theodorakian contribution are equally necessary. New recordings, new interpretations, new research should see the light of day immediately both in Greece and abroad.

The music of Mikis Theodorakis should be the subject of study both at school and at university level. For instance, a series of lectures focusing on the music of Mikis Theodorakis in the framework of a course con-

² The words “her name” implies Freedom.

cerning the “History of Music of the 20th Century” or of a course about the “Interdisciplinary Teaching of Music/History/Literature” should be included in the curricula of music academies all over the world. At the same time, comparative studies of Theodorakis’ music work and of the music works of other composers of the same period and with the same engagement such as the Portuguese Fernando-Lopes Graça, the Frenchman Henri Tomasi or the Italian Luigi Nono, among others, could provide very interesting results and reinforce our opinion that Theodorakis’ music should be carefully preserved.

Furthermore, the initiation of young children and young music students to theodorakian work can only contribute positively to the formation of their personality and possibly to the development of their musical talent. Furthermore, the establishment of music competitions where works by Mikis Theodorakis would be performed and the awarding of prizes to the worthiest competitors in honor of Mikis Theodorakis could be a trigger for further research, studies, and performances of Theodorakis’ work.

Finally, as a bearer of universal humanistic ideals—which in our time, alas, are shaken every single moment—the music of Mikis Theodorakis must be spread, protected, and preserved as a precious stone in the edifice of the world’s “cultural heritage.”

Conclusion

Thus, this paper highlights the impact of Theodorakis’ music on the public and the exceptional communication between the composer and the audience. The analysis is based on specific testimonies recorded in the bibliography, as well as unpublished interviews with the composer himself and his most important interpreters—such as Maria Farantouri and Manolis Mitsias, among others—which shed light on the unforgettable ambience of Theodorakis’ concerts. Additionally, the socio-political significance of Theodorakis’ work is highlighted as a valuable pedagogical resource and a peaceful tool for activism. Finally, new methods for sharing Theodorakis’ musical legacy in the post-Theodorakian era are suggested to preserve it as a cultural landmark.

Hence, we think that we could not conclude this paper in a better way than the lyrics that Mikis Theodorakis himself wrote a decade ago, in November of 2012, when Greece was going perhaps through one of the most difficult moments in its modern history, weakened by the economic crisis and undermined internationally. Entitled *ΟΉλιος* (The Sun), this short—always up to date—poem summarizes the values of Dignity, Justice, Union and Democracy for which Mikis Theodorakis fought tirelessly throughout his life with his political action and his musical creation and which we must defend in perpetuity:

<p>ΌΉλιος</p> <p>Σέ μιά μικρή χώρα ξγινε μεγάλο ξγκλημα γι’ αυτό κάθε νέος καί κάθε νέα σέ όλο τον κόσμο πρέπει νά κλάψει πικρά. Γιατί όταν ποδοπατείται ένα λουλούδι είναι τά νιάτα του κόσμου πού ποδοπατιούνται.</p> <p>Γιατί όπου σκοτώνεται ένα τραγούδι είναι τά νιάτα του κόσμου πού σκοτώνονται. Βοηθήστε νέοι καί νέες νά σηκώσουμε τον ήλιο πάνω από την Έλλάδα. ΌΉλιος μας είναι καί ό δικός σας Ήλιος. <i>Είναι ό Ήλιος όλου του κόσμου.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Μίκης Θεοδωράκης Νοέμβριος 2012</p>	<p>The Sun</p> <p>A big crime happened in a small country that’s why every young man and every young woman in the whole world must cry bitterly. Because when a flower is stepped on it is the youth of the world who are being trampled upon.</p> <p>Because where a song is killed it is the youth of the world that are being killed. Help young men and women to raise the sun over Greece. Our Sun is also your Sun. It is the Sun of the whole world.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Mikis Theodorakis November 2012</p>
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Mikio Teodorakio fenomenas.

Nuo partitūros iki poveikio publikai: unikalus „komunikacinis kanalas“

Santrauka

Žymus kompozitorius, drąsus politikas, akademikas humanistas Mikis Teodorakis mirė 2021 m. rugsėjo 2 d. Atėnuose, sulaukęs 96 metų. Teodorakio kūrybos aptarimas (partitūrų anotacijos, paties kompozitoriaus pateikta kūrinų analizė ir t. t.) supažindina mus su jo kūrybiniu procesu, tačiau nesuteikia informacijos apie kūrybos poveikį visuomenei ar apie „komunikacinį kanalą“, užsimezgsų tarp kompozitoriaus ir publikos. Tam tenka pasitelkti ne tokius įprastus tyrimo būdus, pvz., straipsnius spaudoje ar interviu. Tyrimo tikslas – pasitelkus nepublikuotus interviu su pačiu kompozitoriumi ir svarbiausiais jo kūrinų interpretatoriais, pabandyti įsigilinti į minėtus ir kitus klausimus, išryškinti jo muzikos poveikį visuomenei, aptarti išskirtinį kompozitoriaus ir publikos „bendravimo kanalą“. Be to, straipsnyje pabrėžiamas teodorakiškos kūrybos, kaip vertingos pedagoginės medžiagos ir kartu tarsi taikaus kovos ginklo, socialinis politinis vaidmuo. Galiausiai siūlomos naujos Teodorakio „muzikinės galaktikos“ perteikimo alternatyvos siekiant, kad ji būtų išsaugota ir palaikoma kaip mūsų kultūrinio paveldo orientyras.