

## The "Song" as the Origin of the "Cyclic Phenomenon" in the Work of Mikis Theodorakis

At the beginning of the 1960's while Greece is still counting its victims of the Hitler monstrosities and suffering open wounds because of the slaughter it experienced in the civil war, Mikis Theodorakis pounds out:

*"Unite stone and stone  
unite hand in hand.  
The mountains and the ravines begin the song.  
Cities and harbors join in the dance:  
Today we marry the sun  
the sun to the bride, the dearest, the Joy!"*<sup>1</sup>

It is for Mikis Theodorakis the era of the composition of his one and only "modern pop<sup>2</sup> musical tragedy" with the title "*To Tragoudi tou Nekrou Adelfou*" (= "*The Ballad of the Dead Brother*").

It does suffice only to read these words: "*Unite stone and stone / unite hand in hand*", and the meaning of cycle becomes at once comprehensible. A meaning which is reinforced in the very same process of melo-poetry, because the melodic theme which is associated with these lyrics, that is the melodic theme of the last art song "*Unite! Rejoice*" of "*The Ballad of the Dead Brother*", is also the melodic theme of the orchestral introduction of the work. The meaning of cycle is therefore absolutely clear!

This is not a chance phenomenon. Mikis Theodorakis, the composer is greatly concerned not only with the "*cyclic form*" but also the "*music form*":

*"I have always enjoyed the notion of form (...) I believe that the song is independent, at the same time I want the listener to be initiated into meaning of the form and further... The cycle of songs is another form more advanced."*<sup>3</sup>

The "*cycle of songs*", the "*pop oratorio*", the "*modern pop musical tragedy*", the "*flow-song*", are the music forms which compose one of the basic tools of Mikis Theodorakis for the creation to "*music for the masses*". However what exactly is meant with the term and why does he want to create "*music for the masses*"?

Born in the village of on the border island of Hios, in the East Aegean Sea, in 1925, during a period of great political instability due to the proclamation of Democracy one year earlier, the Greek composer, philosopher, innovator and politician Mikis Theodorakis grows up during the period between wars. During the World War II he was influenced immensely by the climate of the times. And so it was to him a natural course of events when at the very tender age of he became actively involved in war defending his country which was under attack from the Italians and Germans. When World War II was declared over, he continued to fight in the Greek Civil War that followed becoming totally absorbed in the ideologies of Marx and Lenin which as a resulted to his total dedication to the concept of freedom.

Having graduated from the National Conservatory of Music in Paris with Olivier Messiaen (musical analysis) and Eugène Bigot (conduction of orchestra), and lived for many years moving the circle of artists in Western Europe, Mikis Theodorakis realises that he is not at all interested in "*creating for an elite*". Quite the opposite, his deepest desire is to create a music that is unrestricted of all classification and categorization, a music that is directed at both the people and the elite, at the individual as well as the crowd, a: "*music without borders*".

Convinced that "*one of the elements of freedom for the people is learning*"<sup>4</sup>, influenced by the ideals of Solomos and Hegel, and inspired by "*the socialistic political rebellion*" which according to Lenin "... transforms the culture, distanced from the people, during conditions of capitalism back into his domain giving the working class the possibility of the essential use of the properties of his culture, civilization and democracy"<sup>5</sup>, Mikis Theodorakis wanted, as he expressed during an interview I took from him on January 9<sup>th</sup> 2001, "*to offer great art to the people so he might*

converse with great works of art such as those which only aristocracy had the opportunity to do"<sup>6</sup>. He believes that in this way he will be able to contribute to the education and as a result the "liberation of the masses", and in this instance, the "liberation of the Greek people".

For Mikis Theodorakis:

*"Art is Freedom. And for this reason it speaks directly to the free. The artist who holds a conscience of the nature of his work and wishes his work to have well developed receivers, should contribute to ensuring freedom, to be free, as only in this way his efforts full filled."*<sup>7</sup>

It was so that, during the sixties while Greece entered a new period of political instability, change and class upheaval and the Greek people were suffering under the extremes of nationalism of the ruling social class as well as the increasing anti-communism feelings, Theodorakis was assigned head of the "politico-cultural renaissance movement" and he creates "a music for the masses". "Music for the masses" is born out of "the marriage of modern Greek pop music and modern Greek poetry." Out of this union is created in turn, new musical forms that refer to previous ones.

These forms characterize the "movement of the art song"<sup>8</sup> which was inaugurated by Mikis Theodorakis in Paris in 1958, with the process of melo-poetry of "Epitaph" of Yannis Ritsos. The sole aim of the movement was the conjunction of "savante music" – appreciated by the elite- and "pop music" – appreciated by the people. As a result Mikis Theodorakis hoped to achieve a conjunction of the elite and of the people as well as the elimination of the "social class system" from the world of music culture to which everyone would have access regard less of social or educational status.

Mikis Theodorakis, well-aware of his educational role, realised he owed it to the people to maintain the movement to progressively initiate the people to the meaning of musical form beginning with the "song" heading to more complex forms.

Mikis Theodorakis considered the "art song" as a "simple form of music", as "a melody as we say a musical phrase tied to a text"<sup>9</sup>. During my interview with him on June 9<sup>th</sup> 2001, he characteristically said:

*"In art-song poetry and music co-exist. My efforts have focused on the exposure of the music that is embedded in the lyrical poetic work. To the extent where the new achievement, the art-song which arose from the co-existence, could be characterized – due to its function – as pop, then our effort diverse for the framework of an atomic success and it is impressed upon the collective memory uncountable consequences for the psyche dynamic of the national conscience".*<sup>10</sup>

Mikis Theodorakis believes that "the art song" is "the bread of life because it speaks straight to the heart and the sentiment and less to the mind"<sup>11</sup>. He describes the "art song" as "the red dot which redeems the tyranny of grey bearable"<sup>12</sup>. For Mikis Theodorakis the "art song" is a "type of modern tragedy. The "art song" is a race in its essence, in its path and in its historical continuity"<sup>13</sup>.

This definition is justified in the etymology of the word "tragoudi" (= song). The "tragoudi" derives from the word "tragodia" (= tragedy) which in turn is derived from the word "tragodos" = "tragos + aoidos" (= goat + singer). The tragedy is therefore the "epi trago odi" which refers to the dance round the goat sacrificed to the gods or to those who dance in exchange to the goat. The first explanation remains the most logical.

The slightly more advanced form, in comparison to the "art song", is the "cycle of songs". Undoubtedly Theodorakis believes that "the «cycle of songs» does not constitute a particular form of music. It strictly adheres to a poetical text which however is defined by a joint central idea. And therefore analogous with the depth of component of the poetic text, repetition and meaning of the development is defined."<sup>14</sup>

Mikis Theodorakis defines three different categories of "cycle of songs" relevant to the degree of link between the text and the music.

Further between 1960 and 1968, the composer inspires three new advanced musical forms: "the pop oratorio", "the modern pop musical tragedy" and "the flow song".

The popular oratorio is born in 1960 with the melo-poetic process of the "Axion Esti" of the Nobel Prize winner the Greek poet Odysseus Elytis. It could be said that this new form which is renamed by Mikis Theodorakis into "meta-symphonic music", is imposed by the very form of the poetic work.

According to the composer, *"the difference between the meta-symphonic and the symphonic music appears in the existence of the following elements in meta-symphonic music: 1) popular song, 2) folk instruments and popular singers, 3) symphonic instruments, 4) chorus, 5) the "savant" poetic text. Contrary to the symphonic work which ceases to employ folk instruments and popular singers supporting however the poetic text. So it is that the symphonic work continues to look upon it as a modern oratorio based on the poetic words and human voices."*<sup>15</sup>

The *"modern pop musical tragedy"* is inaugurated by Mikis Theodorakis between 1960 and 1963, during which time he wrote the musical and poetical material of *"The Ballad of the Dead Brother"*. According to the composer, this type has its roots in the ancient Greek tragedy which though time gave birth to the Italian "opera" as well as the French "lyrical tragedy". Also as described by Mikis Theodorakis, it has a place in world political theatre which was inaugurated by Berthold Brecht *"and as a result shares many common elements which are basically modern mythology – which is supported by recent historical events, such as the Greek civil war in this instance – and the modern pop song"*. It is complete scene with dialogue, dance and pantomime which bring grace to *"art songs"* and music. Mikis Theodorakis considers *"the «modern pop musical tragedy» as a continual compact musical-dance expression."*<sup>16</sup>

It is his wish for this type of music to be understood by the people and not to be directed only at the elite. At the same time, he wishes for it to maintain its modern character. The subject matter therefore should concern modern man and be sourced from modern history which *"has its own legends and heroes"*.

Regarding the *"flow song"*, it is an original form which has its roots in the lament songs of ancient Greek tragedy, named *"kommoi"*. It would appear that they have traversed the centuries in the form of long Gregorian songs as well as the Byzantine hymns or in the form of the *"infinite melody"* of Wagner; discarding every traditional element and embracing completely the prosody of the text<sup>17</sup>.

According to Mikis Theodorakis, *"in the «flow song» which is a type of an infinite melody<sup>18</sup>, the melodic line is not recycled but is repeated recreating the atmosphere of the poem."*<sup>19</sup> *"This form is far removed from every type of popular music. The esoteric development of the Modern Greek melody depends upon the exploitation and extension of its basic elements. The melody follows great poetic texts with free style. The «flow song» is longer in duration in comparison to the popular song which lasts for 3 to 4 minutes<sup>20</sup> and can go on for as long as 20 to 40 minutes as was the case in the Byzantine Hymn."*<sup>21</sup>

That which is particularly interesting in the whole work of Mikis Theodorakis is the greater cycles which appears most often (for example, the great cycle of *"Arcadies"* as well as that of *"Politeies"*) and comprise works of the same or different musical forms. In point, the greater cycle of *"Politeies"* comprises four "cycles of song": *"Politeia A"*, *"Politeia B"*, *"Politeia C"* and *"Politeia D"*, while the greater cycle of *"Arcadies"* comprises six "cycles of song": *"Arcadie I"*, *"Arcadie II"*, *"Arcadie III"*, *"Arcadie IV"*, *"Arcadie VIII"*, *"Arcadie X"*, the meta-symphonic work *"Arcadie V"* and three "flow songs": *"Arcadie VI"*, *"Arcadie VII"* and *"Arcadie IX"*.

At the same time close connections are revealed not only between songs of the same cycle but also between songs of different cycles as well as works of different musical forms.

A musical-poetical analysis of several works reveals:

A) that the **existence of a cycle** is created through:

1) common poetical forms of the songs of the same cycle:

- for example, the poems of three verses dominate as follows: 68,75% in *"Politeia A' and B'"* and 55% in *"Politeia C' and D'"*;

2) in the rhythms and rhythmic cells which appear in more than one song of the cycle:

- the rhythm of *zeibekikon* which appears in many songs of the modern pop musical tragedy *"The Ballad of the Dead Brother"* [i.e. the songs of *"The Dream"* (= *"To Oneiro"*), *"The afternoon"* (= *"Deilino"*), *"Pavlos and Nicolios"*, *"At the gardens"* (= *"Sta pervolia"*), *"Unite! Rejoice"* (= *"Enotheite! Doxastiko"*)] turns them into essential elements of an *"internal cycle"*;

3) within the same melodic theme or motif where more than one song appears in the same cycle:

- within the "cycle of songs" *"The Six Eluard"*, the first song entitled *"«Elle va s'éveiller d'un rêve noir et bleu»*, the third song entitled: *«Sous des poutres usées»*, and the sixth song entitled:

«*J'ai le pouvoir d'exister sans destin*», «*a cycle into the cycle*» is created. In studying the three poems we can see that they refer to three different spiritual states of a person- in this case of the poet-: in the beginning, he is determined to face life with courage, thereafter an unending pessimism dominates him and finally he attempts to recover his inspiration. Mikis Theodorakis preferred to highlight the cyclic evolution of feelings: courage – pessimism – new optimism, maintaining the same melody in all three songs;

- Version B' of the second melodic *theme B* of the song "*Lucid Suffering*" (= "Xasteros Ponos") of the "*cycle of songs*" "*More Lyrics*" (= "Lyrikotera") appears in the third melodic theme C of the song "*The sob of Angels*" (= "Lygmos Angelon") and in part in the third melodic theme C of the song "*Nostalgia*" (= "Nostalgia") of the same "*cycle of songs*".

B) that the **union of different cycles of songs** is realized through:

1) common poetical themes:

- for example, in "*Politeia A' and B'*", the themes which dominate are ones of poverty, sadness and unhappiness due to exile and to emigration, and they direct us to themes of *rebetic songs*. On the other hand, "*Politeia C' and D'*" refer to social injustice, to desperation, to loneliness, to the withering that a lost love brings. Despite this, both "*Politeia A' and B'*" as well as "*Politeia C' and D'*" hope and a tint of optimism shine through.

2) the rhythm and rhythmic cells which appears in different "*cycles of songs*":

- for example, within the musical analysis of the cycles of songs "*Politeia C' and D'*", the frequent use of the 6/8 rhythm as well as 2/4 or 3/4 can be discerned. The rhythmic scheme of the triplets  $\overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}}$  and of the dotted notes  $\text{♩} \text{♩}$  which appears in both cycles, make up the composite chain; the rhythm which dominates however is *chassapikon*.

3) common musical forms:

- for example, in the four cycles of "*Politeies*", the form which dominate is the strophic with refrain. It is based on many short themes which are matched with each lyric (a theme/a lyric). The repetition of the themes and of the refrain, project the poetical text and communicate intensely the emotions expressed.

C) that the **union of works of different musical forms** is realized through:

1) the use of the same poetic text:

- for example, a new reworking of the process of melo-poetry of the poetical text of the "flow song": "*Our Sister Athina*" allows Mikis Theodorakis to include it in the "*Symphony n. 7*" the named "*Of the Spring*";

2) common musical themes:

- for example, the first melodic theme of the third prelude for piano, composed in 1947, is also the first melodic theme A of the song "*Mes soeurs prennent dans leur toile*" of the "cycle of songs": "*The Six Eluard*", composed in 1958. This melodic theme reappears in another tone and rhythm transformed in the song "*Margarita–Margaro*" of the "cycle of songs": "*The Archipelago*" composed between 1957 and 1959.

- The final melodic motif of the second theme B of the song "*Mes soeurs prennent dans leur toile*" of the "cycle of songs": "*The Six Eluard*", composed in 1958, is also used in the song "*The blood of love*" (= "Tis agapis aimata") of the pop oratorio "*Axion Esti*" composed between 1960 and 1963.

The reappearance of poetic and musical themes which amongst other gives birth to the "*cyclic phenomenon*" in the work of Mikis Theodorakis redeems it unique. The pedagogical role of the great and varied work springs from this recognition. The composer himself supports that:

*"To create «Politeies» is like creating symphonies. Every song that was written – for example, in prison – could be included in great forms. These forms give the simple listener great wealth; they educate him. This is why I want the simple Greek person to be able to recognize symphonies (n. 1, n. 3 etc.) as well as «Politeies»; they were produced out of a pedagogical feeling."*<sup>22</sup>

Fortunately, due to this as well as to ever-lasting messages of Peace, Liberation and Democracy conveyed in the music of Mikis Theodorakis, it broke barriers, crossed borders, became ecumenical as well as a tool able to carry out a basic function *"the education of the people and their transformation into historical forces."*<sup>23</sup>

In order that future generations may gain from this double role of the music of Mikis Theodorakis we owe it to ourselves to study it, to protect it and to preserve it.

Moreover we should not forget that the choice of the *"cyclic form"* which transforms every work into a *"star"* of *"the musical galaxy"* of Mikis Theodorakis, is a conscious one. According to Mikis Theodorakis, *"the melody, the art song, the cycle of songs, the pop oratorii, the meta-symphonic works, the symphonies, the oratorii, the lyrical tragedies compose a joint Sound Musical Lyrical Philosophical Universe"*.<sup>24</sup> He declares besides: *"I want than my music will be one continuous history."*<sup>25</sup>

Is there better proof of this statement of the composer than to think of the melodic theme of the *"art song"*: *"Unite! Rejoice"* of *"The Ballad of a Dead Brother"* which reappears some 30 years later in *"Canto Olympico"*, composed in 1992?

*"Canto Olympico"* is a *suite* with seven parts for tenor-baritone-pianist-mixed chorus and symphony orchestra which relies on the melo-poetic process of Theodorakis' poetic text as well as the poetic text of Dimitra Manta. The piece was composed for the Olympic Games of Barcelona at the request of the President of the International Olympic Committee, Mr Juan Antonio Samaranch.

More specifically in this work the above mentioned melodic theme, appears: a) in the first part *"Ode to Zeus"* (= *"Odi ston Dia"*) and b) at the end of the third part *"Ode to the first Olympian champion"* (= *"Odi ston proto Olympioniki"*) in the first part entitled: *"Rejoice"* (= *"Doxastiko"*) as well as in the second part of *"Stones Unite!"* (= *"Enotheite vrachia- vrachia"*) in the sixth part entitled: *"The resurrection of Olympic Games"* (= *"I Anagennisi tis Olympiadas"*).

Wishing to explain this choice, Mikis Theodorakis writes:

*"I thought that the content and the form of a work which is directed at sports fans around the world should be equal to simple performances as far as is possible to the song which constitute the basis of music education in modern societies."*<sup>26</sup>

And in this way *"the cycle"* which open in the 60's, closes in the 90's showing in the best possible way the exactness of the experienced and internationally renowned composer when faced with the propositions of an enthusiastic enlightened composer.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Unite! Rejoice!" in "The Ballad of the Dead Brother" of Mikis Theodorakis.

<sup>2</sup> Theodorakis Mikis, *Music and Theater*, Athènes, Ed. Eleftheriadis Group, 1983, 180 p.: According to the translator of the book, Georges Giannaris, the term "pop" for "laik" (*laikos, laiki, laiko*) is better suited since the English word does not convey all the connotations of the Greek term either sociologically or musically.

<sup>3</sup> Interview given by Mikis Theodorakis to Kalliopi Stiga, Athens, 9-6-2001.

<sup>4</sup> Interview given by Mikis Theodorakis to Kalliopi Stiga, Athens, 9-6-2001.

<sup>5</sup> Great Russian Encyclopaedia, vol. 28, *"the socialistic political rebellion"*, p. 244.

<sup>6</sup> Interview given by Mikis Theodorakis to Kalliopi Stiga, Athens, 9-6-2001.

<sup>7</sup> Theodorakis Mikis, *Where can I find my soul? / Art and Civilization*, Athens, Ed. Livanis, 2002, p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> I use the term "art song" to express the Greek term "endechno laiko tragoudi".

<sup>9</sup> Theodorakis Mikis, *Anatomy of Music*, Athens, Ed. Synchroni Epochi, 1983, p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> Interview given by Mikis Theodorakis to Kalliopi Stiga, Athens, 9-6-2001.

<sup>11</sup> Interview given by Mikis Theodorakis to Kalliopi Stiga, Athens, 9-6-2001.

<sup>12</sup> Theodorakis Mikis, *Where can I find my soul? / Art and Civilization*, Athens, Ed. Livanis, 2002, p. 200.

<sup>13</sup> Theodorakis Mikis, *About the Art*, Athens, Ed. Papazissi, 1976, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Theodorakis Mikis, *Music for the Masses*, Athens, Ed. Olkos, 1972, p. 23-24.

<sup>15</sup> Theodorakis Mikis, *Anatomy of Music*, Athens, Ed. Synchroni Epohi, 1983, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Theodorakis Mikis, *Poetry setting in music*, Athens, Ed. Ypsilon, 1997, vol. I, p. 88.

<sup>17</sup> Beltrando-Patier Marie-Claire (dir.), *History of Music*, Paris, Ed. In Extensio, 1998, p. 771.

<sup>18</sup> Wagner Guy, *Mikis Theodorakis: A life for Greece*, Paris, Ed. PHI, 2000, p. 171.

<sup>19</sup> Flessas Iannis, *Mikis Theodorakis*, Athens, Ed. Aigokeros, 1994.

<sup>20</sup> Theodorakis Mikis, *Music for the masses*, Athens, Ed. Olkos, 1972, p. 107-108.

<sup>21</sup> Theodorakis Mikis, *Poetry setting in music*, Athens, Ed. Ypsilon, 1988, vol. 3, p. 127.

<sup>22</sup> Interview given by Mikis Theodorakis to Kalliopi Stiga, Athens, 9-6-2001.

<sup>23</sup> Interview given by Mikis Theodorakis to Kalliopi Stiga, Athens, 9-6-2001.

<sup>24</sup> Theodorakis Mikis, *Poetry setting in music*, Athènes, Ed. Ypsilon, 1988, vol. 3, p. 167.

<sup>25</sup> Folkerts Gerhard, *The symphonies of Mikis Theodorakis*, in Proceedings of International Congress: «*Mikis Theodorakis: the man, the creator, the musician, the politician, the man from Crete, the Ecumenical...*», Hania, Ed. Department of Hania with the help of the Minister of Culture, December 2005, p. 109–110.

<sup>26</sup> Introduction of Mikis Theodorakis to the cd «Canto Olimpico», Athens, 1996, LYRA CD 0193.

## Santrauka

### Daina kaip ciklo fenomeno ištakos Mikio Theodorakio kūryboje

Graikų kompozitorius, mąstytojas ir politikas M. Theodorakis nuo pat jaunystės buvo ištikimas laisvės idealams. Būdamas įsitikinęs, kad „visuomenės švietimas yra vienas iš faktorių, padedančių jai laisvėti“, ir įkvėptas „kultūrinės ir socialinės revoliucijos“, jis siekė „meną dovanoti liaudžiai“. Todėl XX a. septintąjį dešimtmetį jis buvo Graikijos politinio ir kultūrinio atgimimo judėjimo priešakyje ir kūrė muziką „liaudies masėms“. Pasak kompozitoriaus, „muzika liaudies masėms“ gimė iš graikų tradicinės ir populiariosios muzikos bei neohelenistinės poezijos sąjungos. Šis susiliejimas sąlygojo ir naujų muzikos formų, tokių kaip dainų ciklas, liaudiška oratorija, šiuolaikinė muzikinė tragedija, ištisinės plėtotės daina, atsiradimą. Tačiau visuomenės supažindinimas su šiomis naujomis, sudėtingesnėmis, muzikos formomis turėjo vykti palaipsniui, todėl Theodorakis pradėjo nuo paprastesnių formų, t. y. dainos.

Šio pranešimo tikslas – atskleisti sąsajas tarp ciklo dainų, tarp įvairių dainų ciklų ir net tarp skirtingos formos kūrinių, kadangi, kaip sakė pats kompozitorius, „norėčiau, kad mano muzika būtų viena begalinė istorija“. Kita vertus, pranešimas atskleidžia švietėjišką jo ciklo fenomeno vaidmenį ir tarptautinei auditorijai siūlo būdus, kaip išsaugoti ir puoselėti jo kūrybą, galinčią tapti esmine priemone, „šviečiant visuomenę ir paverčiant ją istorine varomąja jėga“.