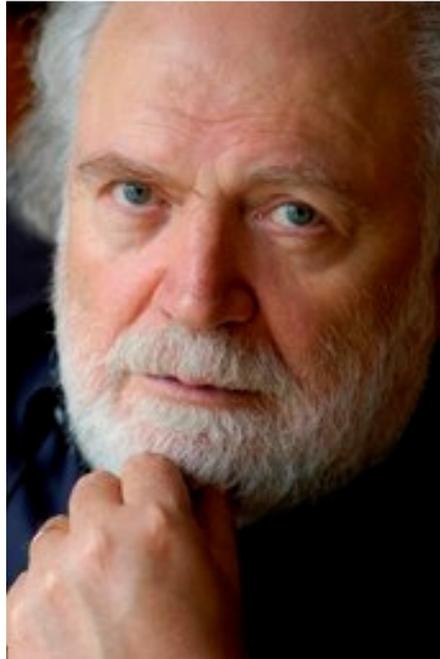


Giannis Markopoulos: The Cretan Master

By Andrew Glover-Whitley



Giannis Markopoulos

Giannis Markopoulos is not a name that is recognised and known and yet his music *is* known, very well known in fact, and not only to classical musicians but pop music followers of the late 70's and 80's as well as millions of TV viewers over the years since.

A famous TV series in 78 entitled "*Who Pays The Ferryman*" had the music of this most enigmatic of all Greek composers as its soundtrack. Now most of you will be going "Ah yes! What a great tune that was".

<http://youtu.be/hGGtSkyasNA>

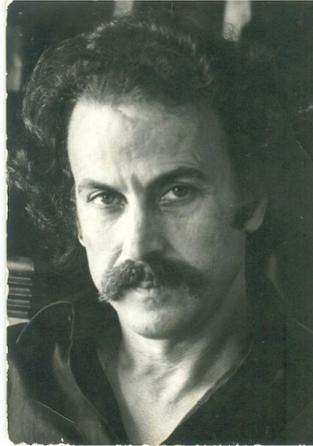
Although the theme tune sold millions around the world and is still played somewhere in the world everyday of the year his name has remained unknown. His other music is just as engaging and like all Greek composers, and like all Greek music for that matter, there is no distinction between high art and popular music.

Something we could probably learn from in the West. All the great Greek composers write in whatever style appeals to them at the time. So for someone like Markopoulos, as is the same for Thoedorakis and the late Hadjitakis etc, to write a hit popular tune is not something to be frowned upon, but something to be welcomed alongside writing Symphonies, Operas or chamber music pieces. These composers will turn their hand to anything if they wish to. Popular songs and dances, folk idioms and dances of which they are masters, classical, film and TV, even advertisement jingles. They are masters of their trade and Markopoulos is no exception.

He was born on the majestically stunning and haunting rugged island of Crete in 1939 and grew up in its capital hearing all manner of music and sounds. Some of the influential elements that he acknowledges to have influenced him are the unique folk musicians of the island, the birds and sea, and strangely the sound of mines being detonated on the beaches after the war as a child. He studied at the local Heraklion Music Conservatory and then moved to Athens to complete his studies.

It was at this time that he began writing the works that he would become famous for, locally at first, and then nationally. He moved abroad and finally to England where he studied under Elisabeth Lutyens. This was during the dark days of the Generals barbaric junta (1967-1974) in the late 60's. He returned to Crete in 1969 and organised protests and performances of his music that the Military Junta were unable to stop. The works from this period show an edge and depth that few other Greek composers were able to instil in their music as far as protest, and spoke of his great humanism and love of independence that stems from the very soil and rock of Crete itself.

He was helped however by having one of the greatest voices in Greek and Cretan music at that time working alongside him. Nikos Xilouris (*pron, Zilooris*), as did Markopoulos, came from one of Crete's many old respected families, full of fire and a strong sense of independence. Xilouris's voice was like rich warm honey being trickled down your throat slowly and pleasingly. They worked together for many years and on many projects until Xilouris's untimely death from a brain tumour in 1980. A virtuoso voice, lauto and lyra player sorely missed by all who know his work and Cretan music.



Nikos Zilouris in traditional Cretan mood.

Markopoulos wrote many original song cycles for Xilouris's voice "*Chronicles*", "*Lifetime*", "*Nativeland*" etc. Markopoulos formed his own ensemble to back him and perform his new compositions. The line-up varied but always used Cretan instruments as well as orchestral ones and could vary from three or four players to over twenty. The main stay was always Xilouris's voice and Lyre playing. The other instruments would include Cretan lauto (lute), dulcimer, oboe, piano and invariably a small ensemble of strings and some strangely assembled percussion instruments as well as standard ones.

<http://youtu.be/1AA30-NY6tY>

The above link is to an album of traditional Cretan music arranged in a unique way by Markopoulos and showcasing Zilouris's amazing vocals and solo prowess.

As well as these more personal statements of his Cretan and Greek roots Markopoulos has gone on to write many orchestral, choir, and chamber works. His large majestic Piano Concerto "*Shapes in Motion*" is a tour de force to be reckoned with, as is his "*Concerto Rhapsody*" for Cretan Lyra and Orchestra (*recently released on Naxos Records*).

<http://youtu.be/giTxTXGUp7E>

The piece that anyone who may know his name may know besides "*Who Pays the Ferryman*" is his retelling of the Orpheus myth in his Oratorio "*Liturgy of Orpheus*". He has a propensity to write big choral and orchestral works and this is one of his finest. It combines Cretan instruments into the full textures of a Western Classical Orchestra as well as narrator, singers and soloists and truly speaks of archaic Greece as well as Crete and his love of homeland. It is an appealing work in a way that much of his output is. (*now available in English on the Naxos label*)

<http://youtu.be/EAFxYxiZKjc>

His biggest work to date runs at just under two hours and is entitled "*Re-Naissance: Crete -Between Venice and Constantinople*". It deals with his love of his island homeland and is a symphony in all but name. It covers the Cretan influence on the Empires that invaded and controlled the island before Crete's independence and final union into the homeland of Greece in 1913. It is a majestic, and glorious work, and full of great melodies, so much so that you almost feel overwhelmed by such masterfulness of melodic invention.

Markopoulos is now in his 70's and is still producing some of the finest music around anywhere to be found. His work load is impressive and still the melodies hit you straight between the eyes with their simple beauty, emotionality and heart wrenching beauty, their Cretanness and their whistle-ability that sometimes is annoying when you don't want to whistle them. Each of his melodies appears to have sprung ready formed from the very terra firma of Crete and this man's mind and soul. Witness just such a melody in a track from the soundtrack to "*Who Pays the Ferryman*" entitled, very simply, "*The Sea*".

<http://youtu.be/jahf2AQrT5I?list=PLFBA262E6412E692E>