

The Uniqueness of Mikis Theodorakis

By Andrew Glover-Whitley



Mikis Theodorakis in the early 1980's

I recently spent sometime on the Ionian Island of Corfu; on the north-east coast, and spent much time exploring the rugged mountains of the north. Everywhere I visited had the usual musical fare of British and American pop music blaring out but occasionally you could come across some island of Greek culture struggling to survive. Sometimes a live group or soloist would be playing, usually a Bouzouki, bass guitar and keyboard. No matter what tracks they played one always appeared, "Zorba's Dance". This one track alone is sure to fire anyone's thirst for more of the same. Most people think this one song as a folk tune. In fact it is a concoction of two Cretan dance tunes and was written by the Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis for the film based on Nikos Kozantzakis's famous book "Zorba The Greek" back in the early 1960's.

Ok, so we all knew that didn't we? Did you know though that Theodorakis has written over a thousand works; popular songs, song cycles, symphonies, chamber music, ballets, theatre scores and film scores. On top of all this he has been a Greek MP a number of times, a left-wing activist, a partisan fighter, political prisoner and exile under the right-wing "Colonels" junta of the late 60's and 70's. So if you ask anyone who knows his name whether they know his music or his life they will undoubtedly say yes and quote "Zorba's Dance". The truth of the matter is that no-one really knows his life or his work.

Theodorakis was born in 1925 on the Greek Island of Chios. He was fascinated by music as a child and at the age of 17 was running his own choir. He became a partisan fighter in the Greek resistance during the Second World War and was captured and tortured by the Gestapo. He was twice buried alive believing him to be dead. Somehow he survived.

He studied during the Greek Civil War, after the liberation of Greece, at the Athens Conservatory and then moved on to the Paris Conservatoire where he was in Messiaen's analysis classes.

It was after this that his work was first acclaimed internationally. He returned to Greece and disaffected with his own music began looking at Greek folk music and urban song. Through this he wondered how he may be able to employ this into his own creations and develop his own unique musical language. It was then that he wrote the scores to two of his most famous scores, "*Ill Met by Moonlight*" and "*Zorba the Greek*", both based in Crete. The later spawning the famous dance tune that made him a household name. He was now writing in two distinct styles: art music, such as symphonies, ballets, chamber music, the other forming what we now consider as a traditional lineup of popular Greek music playing Rembekikos and Sirtakis etc that he either wrote himself or arranged for the various lineups of the groups he now led.

In 1967 "The Colonels" junta took power and being a left wing activist Theodorakis was soon in their sights. He was arrested and sent with his family into internal exile on the island of Zaton, a desolate and barren place. He was later interned in the Orpos concentration camp where he was again tortured. This did not deter him from continuing to compose his music much to the chagrin of the junta who in the end published Army Decree No.13 banning his music and anyone from listening to it. Due to this his popularity among working and middle-class Greeks grew as a point of resistance to the junta.

Pressure was put on the junta from international sources and Theodorakis was eventually allowed to go into exile in France. With this he became a figurehead of resistance and in the end when the junta collapsed and democracy returned, Theodorakis was welcomed home as a hero.



Theodorakis in the early 2000's

Since those heady days he has continued writing on politics and has been a Greek MP on many occasions. He was one of the main instigators of better relations with the Turkish nation, and currently he leads an organisation that is against the EU's crippling economic demands on Greece, calling for a change in national direction and a withdrawal from the EU and Eurozone.

His works have continued to gain followers wherever they are played, whether popular or art music.

Some of Theodorakis's works:

- 1953 – Symphony No.1
- 1958 – Piano Concerto
- 1983 – Symphony No.7 (Spring Symphony)
- 1946 – String Quartet
- 2007 – East of the Aegean for cello and piano
- 1960 – Axion Esti
- 1992 – Canto Olimpico
- 1959 – Antigone (ballet)
- 1987-88 – Zorba il Greco (ballet)
- 1988-90 – Medea (Opera)
- 1995-96 – Antigone (Opera)
- 1960 – IllMet by Moonlight (film)
- 1964 – Zorba the Greek (film)
- 1973 – Serpico (film)

Famous popular tunes:

- Zorba's Dance
- Sto Perigiali to krifo
- Lipotaktes
- Doxa to Theo

So sit back in this hot sunshine we have been lucky enough to have and enjoy a glass of Retsina to the sound of twanging bouzouki strings and think how different it would have been without Theodorakis.