

Remembering Mikis Theodorakis

Legendary Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis died last week aged 96. He spent a lifetime struggling against fascism and dictatorship – and for a socialist future that would give full expression to human creativity.



Mikis Theodorakis at a rally of the KKE in Greece. (Credit: Getty Images)

Iconic Greek composer, lyricist and political activist Mikis Theodorakis passed away earlier this week, aged 96. Perhaps best known outside of Greece for the music to *Zorba the Greek*, Theodorakis composed prolifically in a number of genres, notably composing settings of the works of political radicals such as martyred Spanish republican Federico García Lorca and Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, as well as many of the finest Greek poets.

His lifelong support of political causes earned him many accolades, most notably the Lenin Peace Prize in 1983 and a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000. The reach of Theodorakis' work was truly global, and maybe most poignantly at this time it is worth remembering how 'Antonis,' from his Mauthausen Cantata about the Holocaust was sung in Kabul in 2001 after the defeat of the Taliban.

Born in Chios in 1925, Theodorakis' early years were peripatetic until his father, a civil servant, settled the family in Crete. That island was to become his spiritual home but his early musical promise was interrupted by the Nazi occupation of Greece in 1941. In 1943, while studying at the Athens Conservatoire, Theodorakis joined the Partisan movement ELAS, the military wing of EAM, an anti-fascist resistance organisation closely associated with the Communist Party of Greece (KKE).

As Partisans gradually defeated the Nazi occupation, left-wing resistance groups began a power struggle for post-war control of the country. Theodorakis was actively involved in this struggle for a socialist Greece and, after siding with ELAS against the Greek government and British forces in 1944, he was arrested and exiled to the island of Ikaria and then to the prison camp on Makronisos, known for its use of torture. Upon his release in 1954, Theodorakis travelled to Paris to resume his

musical education, studying under Olivier Messiaen at the Paris Conservatoire.

His early compositions won Theodorakis awards and praise from Dmitri Shostakovich and Darius Milhaud, who procured him the title 'Best European Composer of the Year' for his 1957 ballet 'Antigone.' Other successes were his first symphony (written in prison on Makronisos), his piano concerto and several ballets, including 'Les Amants de Teruel,' the basis for the film score of *Luna de miel*. As a sign of his growing influence, the title song of that movie – known as *Honeymoon* in English – was later covered by The Beatles. Among other famous artists to put their voice to Theodorakis' tunes was Edith Piaf, who sang his 'Les Amants de Teruel' and 'Quatorze Juillet'.

Fittingly, his first venture into film was the Greek movie *The Barefoot Battalion* (1953), which told the story of a group of orphans resisting Nazi occupation. Theodorakis continued to give expression to the anti-fascist struggle for many years, writing the score for the 1957 film *Ill Met by Moonlight*, which was set in Nazi-occupied Crete. By the time of *Zorba the Greek* (1964), also set in Crete, he had fully embraced the influence of Greek traditional music. The theme, a Syrtaki dance, has become synonymous with Greece as a whole.

But in keeping with his political roots, Theodorakis' first truly Greek work was written before Zorba. 'Epitafios,' from the poem by Yannis Ritsos, a veteran of the Communist resistance conveys a mother's grief for her son killed along alongside eleven other tobacco workers during a demonstration in Thessaloniki in 1936 during the time of right-wing dictator Ioannis Metaxas. Metaxas had Epitafios burned as subversive, but in 1958, Ritsos sent Theodorakis a copy of a second edition. On Theodorakis' return to Greece in 1960 he recorded a daring rebetika rendition to accompany the poem, featuring virtuoso bouzouki playing. The work had a profound impact, bringing the poetry of Ritsos to a popular audience.

In 1964, continuing his political trajectory, Mikis Theodorakis entered parliament on the platform of the United Democratic Left. But these were years of renewed instability and reaction in Greek politics. When the colonels launched their coup d'état in 1967, citing the popularity of the United Democratic Left and establishing an anti-communist junta with the support of the Americans, Theodorakis again found himself facing persecution. He established a resistance group, the 'Patriotic Front' (PAM), which led to arrest and imprisonment; nevertheless, Theodorakis sanctioned pre-existing music for use by filmmaker Costa-Gavras in his hit political thriller *Z* (1969), a thinly disguised account of the 1963 assassination of the politician Grigoris Lambrakis.

Theodorakis was only allowed to leave Greece after the junta was petitioned by a number of internationally famed artists including Dmitri Shostakovich, Leonard Bernstein, Harry Belafonte and Arthur Miller, as well as the French government. Exiled in Paris, he became a focus for anti-colonel sentiment. As his music was banned in Greece, his setting of Ritsos' *18 Short Songs of the Bitter Land* was recorded in secret by George Dalaras (1974) and smuggled out of the country in mismatched record sleeves. His fellow exiles Maria Farandouri and Melina Merkouri used whatever sheet music they could access to perform his works. At the funeral of the poet George Seferis in 1971, mourners following the coffin spontaneously started singing Theodorakis' setting of Seferis' poem *Denial*, transforming it into an informal anthem of resistance. This prodigious output continued and Theodorakis' film score for *Serpico* (Sidney Lumet, 1973) received considerable praise.

But it wasn't only in Greece that Theodorakis found political influence. Maria Farandouri's recording of Theodorakis' 'The Laughing Boy', from Brendan Behan's play *The Hostage* (1958) about IRA activity in the north of Ireland was taken up by liberation movements across the world. On Theodorakis' death, Irish President Michael D. Higgins paid tribute to the song, linking Ireland's struggle for self-determination to Greece's battles against fascism and dictatorship. Theodorakis' passionate, poetic and unbowed music resonated all over Europe, particularly in Scandinavia, Poland, Russia and Germany; footage from his 1987 East Berlin concert even includes clips of a young Angela Merkel in the audience.

Merkel's relationship to Theodorakis indicates an interesting transversality of his work. Renowned in more recent times as an arch opponent of Greece in its fight against debt penury, Merkel has confessed that as a student she sent postcards into junta-controlled Greece in support of the incarcerated composer. In the end, just like the Nazis, the junta was defeated and when it fell in 1974, Theodorakis returned once more. In addition to continuing his work with a return to composing in the classical idiom, he was elected to parliament twice during the 1980s representing a coalition of left-wing parties. In the early 1990s, he even served in a conservative government under the prime ministership of Constantine Mitsotakis.

The love of Theodorakis' life was Myrto Altinoglou, a fellow political activist and medical student who he met in 1944. After their marriage in 1953, she studied radiology at the Institut Curie in Paris. She has stood by him loyally and courageously throughout their turbulent times together. While in exile on Ikaria, he dedicated works to her and her loving letters sustained him during his time on Makronisos. Under the junta, she and their children, Margarita and Yorgos, shared his banishment to the village of Zatouni in 1968 and his Parisian exile in 1970. He is survived by Myrto, his children and grandchildren.

Theodorakis continued to support radical causes until the end, opposing American imperialism, Troika austerity and Israeli persecution of the Palestinians. But despite the controversy these sometimes generated, he was widely revered as the 'soul of Greece'. On his death people gathered outside his home in Athens to bring white and red roses, and spoke of his immortality. His prison cell in Oropos, Attica, has become a museum with citizens arriving to pay their respects.

Current Greek prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, also paid tribute, saying 'Mikis is our history', and parliament observed one minute's silence. Three days of national mourning was declared during which the Greek flag on all public buildings was flown half-mast; his body will lie in state in the Metropolis of Athens, after which he will be buried in Galatas, his father's hometown in Crete.

Today's Greece might be some way from the socialist homeland that Theodorakis spent nine decades struggling for, but it has certainly been shaped by his extraordinary life.