

A Reflection: Mikis Theodorakis on the occasion of your Birthday (29 July 1925 – 2 September 2021)

A Second to Third generational perspective from the Greek Diaspora, Sydney Australia

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It was 1969, my parents were in a flutter, the family was going to make their first trip to Greece in what appeared to be our pilgrimage. My Mother was overseas born from Akrata, Greece. My Father, Sydney-born during the Depression from overseas born, Mytilinean Greek parents. Dad was about to make his first ever trip back to Greece. My late Mother's obstinacy never bought into the "assimilation" myth of the White Australia policy. Like many Greek children of migrant parents, ours was a fluent Greek-speaking household with Saturday Greek School in tow. Living in Greece for 3 months was unlike anything we had ever seen and our Greek language learning certainly came in handy!

The record player back in Australia would almost everyday, play Theodorakis's music. I recalled my Mother often releasing copious tears and muttering under her breath:

"Couldn't I have broken a leg and never have come here".

So at last, here we were in Greece, seeing the land she had struggled not to leave, yet in effect, had, like so many others had forced out its own people. Even in adulthood I could not reconcile what would make my irreplaceable Mother constantly cry, in front of her eldest child with such feelings of abandonment, whenever Theodorakis's music was played?

Paradoxes appeared in this new, yet ancient land of my ancestors. It was like stepping into an open-air museum, becoming alive. We watched the American moon landing from a small television in a καφεείο at Akrata, Pelopponese, with everyone driving what I thought was on the wrong side of the road.

It wasn't until we came to a checkpoint, δι-όδια that we were asked to pull over. My Uncle became extremely nervous. At this point we all had been singing Theodorakis songs at the tops of our voices in our Opel Cadet. The Officer, checked our car. My Uncle, explained we were from Australia and fortuitously, as it turned out were released, went on our merry way and began singing again.

It only became apparent later, that yes, by singing we had broken the Greek Law under the Military Colonels – the Junta (1967-1974), who also were amongst other things, responsible for not being prepared for the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus – despite their military prowess or lack thereof.

Under Junta censorship there was a story at the time, about an Athens policeman who walked his rounds humming a banned Theodorakis song. It was recognised by a passer-by who curtly said to the policeman: "Officer, I'm surprised that you are humming Theodorakis."

The ruling military had black-banned and censored the music of Mikis Theodorakis. He had shown his ideological colours by nailing them to the Left, including the Greek Communist party and leader of the Lambrakis Youth.

The Policeman then promptly arrested the man on a charge of listening to Theodorakis's music. So, the underlying paradoxes of this rent and torn society continued.

The ruling military had black-banned and censored the music of Mikis Theodorakis. He had shown his ideological colours by nailing them to the Left, including the Greek Communist party and leader of the Lambrakis Youth. This remarkable 6 feet 4 inches of a man, with a mane of hair to match represented the creative forces of both music and politics in contemporary Greek life. His sojourn continued his own identification which became indelibly intertwined with the daily struggles of ordinary people. He introduced the bouzouki (what was considered Greek low culture) to the symphonic orchestra. He dared to put some of Greece's notable poets and writers (many whom were also Communists) to music, e.g Elytis, Ritsos. Theodorakis was imprisoned for 5 months, 1968 and was considered to be a "Marxist firebrand". During this time, Greeks were not only buoyed by the progressive creative forces uniting with Theodorakis, in what became a whole movement from abroad against the Junta, it manifested itself in the international media forces of the day. Indeed, where such forces could not be censored, eg. BBC broadcasts. Here the likes of Actress/Singer, later Minister for Culture (1981-89), Melina Mercouri, Singer Maria Farantouri were drumming up international support for Theodorakis. As a disproportionate 'cat and mouse' game was played by the Junta. Yet, this censorship propelled his music to an even wider audience. It also alluded to his plight - his continual transfer from prison to prison as well as enduring torture in custody. For so was his censored music feared by the Fascists - including the poetry that reached into the depths of the modern Greek soul. So much so, that it reflected the tension of turning repression into creative healing and release that so defined it! If Italian is to be the language of Opera, then Greek is the language of Poetry. Theodorakis had melded both together.

I was to learn something new about Mikis through an invitation by my friend Melpo Lekatsa, (herself a survivor of the Athens Polytechnic uprising, November 1973). When we attended together a Greek play about his life, performed at the Athens Badminton Theatre 2015, «Ποιός τη Ζωή μου» (Who, my life). The play showed the scenario where Mikis's parents in Crete sold all their working land. In order for their son Mikis to be educated in Athens, not as a Doctor, Lawyer, Engineer but as a Musician/Composer!

It is unimaginable today, living under a Junta regime, from an Australian multicultural perspective. Yet this is the music that so often

gave strength to the Greek migrant diasporic experience, and their sense of dispossession and renaissance. E.g. Τα Λιανοτράγουδα της πικρής Πατρίδας, Επιτάφιος, Το 'Αξιον Εστί. Also, what is considered to be one of the most beautiful musical works ever written regarding the Holocaust – The Ballad of Mauthausen (1965), (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvNm0F8L96Q>)

In this the 200year commemoration of the Greek liberation from the 4 century rule of the Ottoman Empire, one cannot but dwell on what Theodorakis's creations have meant to the Greek people and the accompanying Diaspora. Whether under the Italian/German/Bulgarian invasions of Greece WWII, the Greek Civil War (1946-8), the Junta period (1967-74), Theodorakis, was staunchly an anti-Fascist and sought to work with various political forces in search of his politically fused ideals. Including how can 'Greekness' (η ρωμιούσση) identity, live without its twin and requisite: η ελευθερία: (freedom)? Or that other elusive quality, that holds the previous two concepts in majestic balance: the search for beauty, (η ομορφιά) throughout such infinite pursuits of wisdom? All with their Greek feminine pronouns divining on eternal ambrosia, feeding the enquiring, restless Greek soul. For Theodorakis the political/musical journey continued, how can one be a πολίτης (citizen) and not be concerned about the πόλις (city)? These concepts for Theodorakis were inextricably linked. Yet in an ERT archival interview (from the Greek national broadcaster – whom the Greek Junta used Emergency powers to control and censor), he was later asked how would he like to be remembered?

His reply:

«Ένας ωραίος Έλληνας», "a beautiful Greek".

Welcome home, 'Archangel of Greece', 'symbol for the struggle of the good'.

The latter, quoted from the first female President of Greece, Katerina Sakellaropoulou (ERT World News, broadcast 2/09/21)

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