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”Mikis Theodorakis‘ Symphonic Music“ - Talk, 30 July, 2005

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Mikis Theodorakis is one of the leading symphonic composers of the twentieth century. His four creative phases differ in their main emphasis and thus in their genre and form. Nevertheless, each creative phase also includes symphonic compositions.

After 1950, three trends increasingly influence music in Western Europe:

- A minority of privileged composers calls itself avant-garde. Their sole objects are musical constructions and the dealings with the musical material. In their works, social policy questions and thus the listeners do not play any role. Their works are noncommittal.
- The second trend is determined by the economy and the media. They support the avant-garde, but above everything else light music that is directed at the passive majority of the consumers.
- The third trend wants a music for the existential needs of the people. The composers deal with questions on birth, life, death, freedom, love, living together. In the formidable arguments of our time, they want to offer answers and possible solutions. They have the strength to swim against the prevailing currents and at the same time to create new music for the people - Theodorakis took this way.

Theodorakis‘ method of composing several works simultaneously becomes evident already in his **first creative phase**: In 1946, he composes PROMETHEUS BOUND and THE FEAST OF ASSI-GONIA in 1947 for orchestra. In parallel, he creates the STRING QUARTETT No. 1 (which was performed for the first time last February at the Megaron in Athens, i.e. only 58 years later!), the SEXTETO for piano, flute and string quartet and the ballet CARNAVAL.

Between 1954 and 1960, Theodorakis is confronted with the West-European avant-garde in the class of Olivier Messiaen in Paris. “The seminar for musical analysis of Messiaen was - so to speak - the salon which all the stars of that time went through,” Theodorakis says. Boulez, Stockhausen, the old companion Jannis Xenakis, all of them - like Theodorakis - pupils of Messiaen, document with their dodecaphonic compositions and electronic experiments that they have freed themselves from the musical traditions of their countries. Theodorakis is confronted with the question: For whom does the symphonic composer write, whom does he want to reach?

Until 1958, he creates big symphonic works, among them the SUITE No. 1 for orchestra and piano, the SUITE No. 2 for orchestra, OEDIPUS TYRANNUS for string orchestra, and also chamber music, which includes the FIRST SONATINA for violin and piano, the PASSACAGLIA for two pianos, the SONATINA for piano and the SECOND SONATINA for violin and piano.

His **second symphonic creative phase** begins in 1959. Thanks to the music for the ballet ANTIGONE, he becomes known in Europe as "the symphonic composer of the year", as Darius Milhaud enthusiastically calls him. From now on, Theodorakis cannot help occupying himself with Greek drama: In the same year, he composes the theatre music for Euripides, THE PHOENICIAN WOMEN. Other compositions for the theatre follow, among them AJAX, THE TROJAN WOMEN and LYSISTRATA.

In 1967, another dark chapter of Greek history begins: the military dictatorship. Arrested and incarcerated, Theodorakis composes RAVEN, a cantata for folk singer, choir and popular orchestra, in the Oropos concentration camp in 1969.

In 1994, Theodorakis reshapes this composition into a new orchestration for mezzosoprano, two harps, flute and string orchestra.

Already in 1960, with AXION ESTI, Theodorakis composes a whole new symphonic genre with an unique orchestration: Folk and symphonic instruments appear on an equal rank. Theodorakis thus finds his own symphonic sound, his own musical idiom, one that meets the sensibility and needs of the people in its melodies, its rhythmic, its harmonies and its orchestration. Several major co-ordinates concur again and again in one moment in Theodorakis' symphonic compositions. These are:

- the scales of Byzantine, Demotic and Laical music that form the melodies,
- the complex rhythms of Greek folk music,
- the tetrachordic composition method,
- the West European composition technique and
- the ancient and contemporary poetry.

Theodorakis has now realised the conception of a new oratorio tradition, creating a new quality of composition work. He carries in this working method with the oratorio MARCH OF THE SPIRIT in 1969 and CANTO GENERAL in 1972.

The **third creative period** begins in the early 1980ies. Theodorakis now considers the symphony to be the highest musical form to realise his ideas. He says: "The symphony is the musical expression for the tragedy of time." He describes the symphonic works as contemporary oratorios. Their basis is provided by the poetical text and the human voice. The latter is an indispensable medium in the dialogue between listeners, interpreters and composers.

Between 1980 and 1982, Theodorakis composes the SECOND SYMPHONY “The Song of the Earth“, the THIRD SYMPHONY, the SADOUKEON PASSION, and the SEVENTH SYMPHONY called the “Spring Symphony“. For the first time, the poetical and compositional reappraisal of recent history also forms the background of his work in the symphonies. The SEVENTH SYMPHONY documents in a special way the attitude of the composer, his intention to take a stand, not to look away, to change things.

Despised by a self-proclaimed West-European avant-garde and hushed up in their academies of arts until today, his symphonic works are not played at concert halls and are published only occasionally by the big record companies. Nevertheless, the symphonic composer Theodorakis unwaveringly pursues his musical way.

The tetrachord technique allows Theodorakis to combine four-tone series of different configurations without having to submit to the ”supremacy of extreme dodecaphony“, as he writes in the programme of the concert tour ”Music without Borders“ in 1994.

Theodorakis used the technique already in the FIRST SUITE, in the ballet ANTIGONE and in AXION ESTI, and now also in the finale of the THIRD SYMPHONY and in the third movement of the SEVENTH SYMPHONY. The tetrachord technique forces the listener to differentiate, so that he can free himself from the conventional system of major and minor, and become open to the new composition method.

In the third creative period, Theodorakis also employs his knowledge of counterpoint techniques and sonata constructions and his understanding of their further development by Bartok, Mahler and Shostakowitsch. In addition, he sees every single composition as a part of his complete works. “I want my whole music to be a continuous story“, he says. This statement is a central element of his musical poetics. It can also be found in the SEVENTH and the SECOND SYMPHONY: In the first movement of the SEVENTH SYMPHONY, he makes use of the song “This Little Summer“ from his song cycle THE CIRCLE. In the second movement, Theodorakis takes up the poem “Our Sister Athina“ written by his friend Yorgos Kulukis, who was imprisoned with him on Makronissos, and uses it as the foundation of the Spring Symphony. The SECOND SYMPHONY refers to the future of the Earth and with it to the future of Man. In both symphonies, Theodorakis leaves out the folk instruments and folk singers. Both symphonies are a kind of music that takes sides:

A central subject of his third creative phase, which Theodorakis takes up again and again, is the destiny of the mothers. This already appears in EPITAFIOS in 1958 and in the SONG OF THE DEAD BROTHER in 1960. ”In the THIRD SYMPHONY, I set the brilliant poem ‘The Demented Mother‘ by Dionysos Solomos to music. But I included one movement with the three most important Byzantine Good Friday melodies, one verse by Konstantin Kafavis and one by myself. Byzantium, Solomos, Kafavis, that is a true dedication to the highest achievement of the Hellenic world,“ Theodorakis writes in his “Anatomy of Music“.

In 1986, Theodorakis composes his FOURTH SYMPHONY: the symphony “Of Choirs“. In it, he draws on the theatre music EUMINIDES and THE PHOENICIAN WOMEN he wrote earlier on. He calls it “The most Greek of the symphonies“.

During his **fourth symphonic creative period**, Theodorakis composes operas for the first time. The first one of them is KOSTAS KARYOTAKIS in 1984. From 1988 on, his opera compositions are determined by the myths of the Ancient World. He creates MEDEA and ELEKTRA.

In 1993, Theodorakis composes his ADAGIO for flute, clarinet, trumpet and string orchestra, which he dedicates “To the victims of the Bosnian war“.

One year later, he writes the dramatic music for MACBETH. Written for flute, bassoon, trombone, two horns, tuba, violoncello, double bass and percussion, it represents a special instrumentation.

In 1995, he concludes his trilogy of tragedies with the work on ANTIGONE. In 2001, he composes the last of his operas up to now, LYSISTRATA.

Theodorakis incorporates themes from his songs into his operas - and thus takes one further step towards the integration of single independent compositions into his complete works.

Within each of his four creative periods, Theodorakis composes major symphonic works in which he takes up the Greek music traditions. He does this out of love and respect for the comprehensive music of Greece, with its inexhaustible of Byzantine, rural and urban music, its special tone colour of the instruments, its great variety of dance rhythms. Its pulse becomes his pulse. He firmly anchors these traditions within his musical consciousness and his symphonic compositions.

At the centre of his symphonic works is not the musical material, but Man. This is what distinguishes Theodorakis from many composers of the West-European avant-garde. At the heart of his symphonic works, there is the protest against the supposedly unchangeable, and the positive construction of the future of humankind. Theodorakis' symphonic work makes us think, it creates in us a desire to realise love, freedom and peace. His visions and dreams fill the musical material with liveliness, emotional strength and a spirit that communicates itself to the listeners and can include them to shape their life differently.

With his symphonic work, the composer **Mikis Theodorakis has created a new type of authentic Greek music and European music**. It singles him out as **the founder of both a Modern Greek school of composers and a Modern European school of composers**.