On Theodorakis’ Song of Songs

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A great hero of the Greeks enters the ancient Herodion Atticus amphitheater at the southern slope of the Acropolis on the evening of September 29, 2007. He is guided slowly and carefully by aides across the large semi-circle area between the front of the stage and the first row of seats. He is tentative in his steps, but confident of purpose. The audience of five thousand gives him a standing ovation for once again coming to the aid of the Greeks with his music. He is raising funds to aid the victims of the devastating summer fires in the historic Peloponnesus region. As he struggles to guide his tall, failing 83-year-old body onto the front row marble seat, he acknowledges the Hellenes by raising his right hand over his unruly white mane of hair and smiles as if to say, “Together, we will triumph over tragedy.” The Athenians applaud wildly as they have done hundreds, maybe thousands, of times before. Mikis Theodorakis is leading the Greeks once again in mourning and celebration. He is linking Apollo and Dionysius.

This night and the next one are dedicated to using song to deal with tragedy, an old Greek custom, maybe even a universal one. The songs are all by Theodorakis. For over seven decades he has composed songs about tragedy and trauma—songs for the concert stage, songs for seashore taverns and village squares, songs for the victims of oppression and torture. He creates songs about bread and wine, and about love and death. He wedds his melodies to Nobel
Prize—winning poetry and has every intellectual and waiter singing the same songs. He wees art and politics.

The Athenian taxi drivers still gossip about the cause of the countless, catastrophic fires—arsonists motivated by real estate greed or is it the Bush administration trying to undermine the Greek olive industry? Even Theodorakis has his suspicions. Weeks earlier he asked that I translate into English his statement on the matter. While I struggled and failed to do justice to the rhythm, tone, and melody of his written words, his daughter, Margarita, was busy producing two historic concerts at the most sacred, most architecturally breathtaking of outdoor concert sites: the Odeon of Herodion Atticus. Margarita Theodorakis produced a fundraiser that proved even the ancient marbles sing her father's songs. She assembled all the great vocalists in Greece: lyrical voices, jazz voices, rock voices, rural voices, and blues voices. And with her father's blessings, she invited one young woman from America, Lina Orfanos.

The audience knows Theodorakis is in poor health. This night might be the last time they see him. He is their greatest creator. He is also a political hero. He may have an international reputation as a composer of popular and symphonic music, but Theodorakis is a Greek in temperament, intellect, and ambition. He set off the cultural revolution in Greece in 1960 with a song cycle about a mother's lament for her murdered son, and his brave opposition to the military junta of 1967–1974 is legendary. His activism continues to inspire social and political progressives in a nation that is currently under economic siege. Earlier in this century, the Greek government nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize for his peace efforts with Turkey.

The performers are all dressed in various shades of black. The audience is in short sleeves and summer dresses, the politicians in suits. Herodion holds 5,000 thousand people, seated on marble rows. It is now three hours into the concert and my wife, Sophia, and I are reaching new heights of anxiety. Much earlier in the evening, we bid Lina good luck backstage, as she joined the ranks of the greatest Greek vocalists. She has never performed in front of such a large audience, and while she has a natural stage presence, sophisticated training, and a voice that Theodorakis himself has called beautiful and suited for his lyrical songs, Sophia and I worry. True to our psychologies, her mother worries that Lina will have stage fright; I worry that she will not hit all the notes dead center. But we both know, too, that this is her destiny, to be on this stage, on this night, with this particular song: Song of Songs. We know she will rise to the occasion. That is what Lina does. She is our hero. Lina's gifts are more cunning than her brain tumor. She is a survivor of 16 years. A tumor, reduced by surgery, now lies dormant in her skull. Lina knows trauma.

The master of ceremonies is about to introduce Lina. I have a thought: What if he says she is from the United States? Will the audience disapprove because of their outrage over the Iraq war? Will they take out their frustrations on Lina? Will they boo her? Will she become flustered? Will she stay on stage? The master of ceremonies announces that Lina Orfanos is a third-generation Greek from New York City on her father's side and that her mother is a Polish Jew. The audience applauds as if acknowledging their own immigrant relatives in New York City.

The lights dim and we see Lina's silhouette as she walks onto the large stage with the eleven piece orchestra composed of classical and folk musicians. Along with her music she is carrying a white handkerchief belonging to the elderly Bonika Kassoutou Nahmis, one of the few Greek Jews who survived Auschwitz. The long, mournful introduction, a line of sheer beauty, heralds a song that was introduced in 1965 as part of a cycle of songs titled The Ballad of Mauthausen. The song cycle raised the consciousness of all Greeks. Its sublime melodic lines, extended harmonies and rhythms, forced listeners to ask, “What happened to our Jews?” With original text and quotes from the Old Testament, Song of Songs is part of a poem cycle about the Mauthausen concentration camp, the Greek Jews and political prisoners it housed and murdered.

How lovely is my love
In her everyday dress
with a little comb in her hair.
No one knew how lovely she was.

Girls of Auschwitz,
girls of Dachau.
Did you see my love?

We saw her on a long journey;
She wasn't wearing her everyday dress
or the little comb in her hair.

How lovely is my love
caressed by her mother,
and her brother's kisses.
Nobody knew how lovely she was.

Girls of Mauthausen,
girls of Belsen.
Did you see my love?

We saw her in the frozen square
With a number on her white hand
and a yellow star on her heart.¹

The song is a true love story about two prisoners. The interpenetration of melody and word make it an extraordinary representation of Eros and Thanatos. Iakovos Kambanellis, the poet and the father of contemporary Greek theater, was interned at the Nazi concentration camp of Mauthausen in Austria. Not adhering to Theodor Adorno's famous dictum that it would be barbaric to write lyrical poetry after Auschwitz, Kambanellis wrote his poems in 1964 and in the following year presented them to Theodorakis. The composer worked on them and created songs that have entered the pantheon of acclaimed song cycles.² The Ballad of Mauthausen has been sung in Greek, Hebrew, German, and English. It has been performed all over the world and was featured at the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Mauthausen concentration camp.

With a huge screen behind the orchestra showing photographic images of the Holocaust, Lina enters the song. Sophia and I clutch hands. After her first words, the audience applauds in recognition. Lina is emotionally expressive but unsentimental. Having taken up a suggestion from me and one approved by Theodorakis, she sings in both Greek and Hebrew. She knows what she is singing about, and she knows that, in part, she is addressing her mother, who was a hidden child during the Nazi terrors in Europe; her father, who wept when he first heard this song and still does; and Theodorakis himself, who once explained that "Pop music helps us forget. Greek music helps us remember." The audience wildly applauds young Lina twice more as her voice reveals despair and depth. Theodorakis is also applauding. His face reveals admiration, gratitude, and surprise.³

By Way of Music and Meaning

I began this essay with a real-world event in order to underscore the immense complexity of grasping what relations exist among musical creativity, performance, and meaning. Words and music, the personal and the political, remembering and forgetting, trauma and recovery, and villains and heroes are all dialectical components of the concert presented that night on the Acropolis. We know that music has the capacity to mesmerize, excite, and soothe. It communicates emotions, aesthetics, history, and even philosophy. Nevertheless, "music" is an inadequate word to encompass all the forms of culture that can be subscribed to it. Music is not a singular phenomenon with a fully knowable relationship to human biology, mind, and behavior. Rather, it exists as musics—diverse, multiple, and unknowable within a single unitary framework of scales and notations.⁴ We are in all likelihood speaking about a multiplicity of activities and experiences. In addition, we are likely speaking about both activity and aesthetics. Music is a small word, but what it signifies is large.
What music "really" means is uncertain, but one of the things on which we probably do agree, at least some of the time, is that music sounds the way moods feel. An additional principle that many might agree upon is that music is performance art. According to Cook, the meaning of music lies more in what it does than in what it represents. But both representation and action are at play, and this is one of music's unique qualities as a form of art. While the Herodion concert represents much from the past, it also is, in its transactions among the players both on and off the stage, clearly a performance activity. It is not simply representing a reality outside of music; the performance itself also constructs a reality of tragedy and trauma. With Song of Songs Theodorakis captures something profound about how the Holocaust felt, and in turn changed the culture of Greece. By assigning music to the material, he intensifies the words so that the Holocaust can be conceived; by performing Song of Songs, Theodorakis and his interpreters further the understanding of the listener, in vivo. Musical performance constructs reality, in addition to representing it.

While the sights and scents on the evening of September 29, 2007, were profound, it was the music in the amphitheater, at least for this listener, that highlighted the experience. The feeling was of being in a sonorous envelope. While Lina's song was plaintive and heralded mourning, I felt pleasure being surrounded by the sounds of Song of Songs. The pleasure was in her vocal pragmatics and in the details of the musical structure of the song. This was art. Simultaneously, however, I felt an anxiety about the other space I was in—a space that had elements of entrapment. That is, the personal context of Lina's physical trauma and the historical trauma represented by the song was horrifying to me. Still, this, too, was art. The intermingling of pleasure and horror—what the music critic David Schwarz refers to as the "crossing of the sonorous envelop"—is what gives music the power to inspire a sense of awe. This is a subjective register that I believe is another of the unique attainments of music.

My experience was enhanced by the Holocaust photographs projected onto the huge screen behind the orchestra. The images stimulated my optical unconscious—murder, prejudice, swastikas, trains, emaciated bodies—as these images unfolded in my vision. But it was the sonorous envelope that actually made for my experience of awe. The music created a space for me that crossed the threshold between my clearly bounded body with its own rhythms and my archaic psychic with its memories and hopes. My experience shifted from linear time into something quite different—an unpredictable ebb and flow that was strangely synchronized with past, present, and future. To call this an "oceanic" feeling would be too reductive. I was in a different self-state. I was mentally alert and I had goose bumps.

Evidence of extended relational processes can be discovered at the Herodion. For instance, the theme of creativity and trauma was everywhere. One can easily identify a number of traumas: the Holocaust; the national tragedy of the fires in the Peloponnese; the internment and beatings suffered by the composer at the hands of the World War II fascists; the internment of the poet at Mauthausen; Lina's life-threatening brain tumor; and her mother's survival of the Holocaust as a hidden child. And then there is the experience of this narrator, who as a very young boy listened to countless retellings of his own mother's frightening stories about rescuing Greek Jews. Thinking hard about the overlap, the levels within levels of what went on that night at the Herodion, leaves me feeling overwhelmed. Yet somewhere in the creative experience there is the important matter of musical art as a way to transcend individual and collective trauma, as a way to heal that which cannot be healed.

Creativity as a Memorializing Aesthetic

Creativity is intimately involved in everyday experiences, in the construction and expression of personal and political values. Memorializing art has been with us since the time of the ancient Egyptians, who delighted in architectural commemorations of bulls and goats. We have come to know it from art as diverse as the
Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., to the ongoing AIDS Memorial Quilt that began as a community arts project in 1987. The passion that memorializing involves can be found in this century in the intense and angry debates over a memorial at Ground Zero for the victims of the September 11 attacks. Mikis Theodorakis harnessed the passion of mourning for the deep damage done to his country and joined it to his unique compositional gifts, thereby creating memorializing art of the first order.

Theodorakis' *Song of Songs* was created as the composer was looking to move beyond his astonishingly popular "folk" music of the early 1960s. His popularity in Greece surpassed that of the Beatles. The artistic merits of his songs were being debated in all major Athenian intellectual circles because Theodorakis had dared to bridge the gap between high art and low art (mass culture). He did this by wedding sophisticated poetry to the *bouzouki*, a folk instrument of the lower classes. He wedded the music of the concert halls to music of workers and the poor. Like many creators, he was moving to increasingly complex structures in his work. He would not rest on his laurels and formulaically repeat his compositions for the marketplace. His musical gifts coupled with social and political engagement made for a restless and revolutionary spirit.

Greece lost close to 87 percent of its Jews during the Holocaust, and as a man of the Left, Theodorakis knew that the only organized Greek group that officially and actively worked to save them from the Nazis was the Communist Party. His historical consciousness was such that he immediately took up the opportunity when presented with the poems by his fellow Leftist Kambanellis. He had already laid the groundwork for songs based on poetry and memory, but the Holocaust required different colors and instruments. For five years he had taught the ears of the Greeks like few other composers. His public was alert to every new composition he recorded and every concert he gave as if they were thirsty for an art that would transform their cultural identity. The early 1960s were dark days for Greece, largely due to the vacuum in political leadership and the legacies of World War II and the Civil War that raged after it. Theodorakis' publically stated cultural project of "music for the masses" became prominent in daily life as if feeding the self-esteem of the entire nation. People waited with great anticipation for his new compositions. They paid emotional and intellectual attention. The public was not a passive recipient.

Meanwhile, Theodorakis used an unknown, 18-year-old female named Maria Farantouri, who was in possession a powerful coloratura voice. A victim of polio, Farantouri seemed to be more than a simple middleperson between the composer and the audience. As she became legendary over the next four decades, in part for singing the Mauthausen songs, Farantouri, with her large voice and broken body, came to symbolize the nation.9

Why did Theodorakis decide to set the Kambanellis poems in the first place? "I did this with much pleasure," he explains, "firstly because I liked the poetry of the texts, and secondly because I was myself locked up during the Nazi occupation in Italian and German prisons, but mainly because this composition gives us the chance to remind the younger generation of history, that history must never be forgotten . . . the Mauthausen Cantata is addressed to all those who suffered under Fascism and fought against it. We must keep the Nazi crimes continually in our minds, because that is the only guarantee and the only way to assure that they are not repeated. And we can see every day that the ghost of Fascism is far from being laid to rest. It seldom shows its real face, but Fascist cultures and mentalities exist all over the world. For us, who had to live through this time of horror, the most important task is to protect our children against this peril." 10

We live in complicated times, and in 2003 Theodorakis was alarmingly accused of anti-Semitism. Kambanellis was also accused. Like many other members of the European Left, both men perceive successive Israeli governments as resorting to excessive military force for security. Both are passionate human-rights activists even in their old age and feel strongly that the policy of some Israeli leaders, particularly of the Right, is the oppression of Palestinians and opposition to a two-state solution. But it is Theodorakis, with the more public persona and his stronger ties to the Israeli Left, who has been given the greater attention on the matter.
At a press conference for the launching of a book based on his own poetry, Theodorakis began to berate the then Sharon government. In the presence of Greek government officials he said, "The Jews were at the root of evil." This statement was then taken out of context and circulated through the world and became an extraordinary source of embarrassment for him and his supporters. Some leaders of the Greek Jewish community tossed it off as the words of an old man. When I had the opportunity to confront him about this, he explained in a matter-of-fact tone that his views about the Israeli people are well known, as are his feelings about racism and other forms of hatred. He claimed not to confuse the struggles of a people with the aggression of their government. "True," he stated, "I did make a poor choice of words and there are segments of Greek society that fan the flames of hatred against the Israelis, but what I said was about Sharon's oppressive tactics—that's what we were conversing about." Theodorakis believes it was his duty to raise consciousness about the Holocaust. When he tried to mediate between Arafat and Alon in 1972, he also felt it was his duty. It should also be noted that his daughter, Margarita Theodorakis, is a strong and vocal pro-Palestinian supporter. Given Mikis Theodorakis' committed pacifism, the feelings about Israeli military aggression can be understood. Yet his words may have unintentionally fanned old stereotypes.

There is reason to believe that the past, the present, and the future are created as mutually interacting modes of time and experience. By extension, an individual not only has a history, but he or she is history by virtue of memorial activity. The past of an individual can be put to different uses: it can be forgotten, sentimentalized, idealized, fetishized, or memorialized. Governments have frequently found ways of appropriating their countries' pasts and at dangerous times, politicizing the memorial activity. The memorial activities of many of the Greek governments of the 20th century, for one, point to such political uses of the past. Holst-Warhaft has argued that mourning, and by implication memorial activity, has often challenged the social and political order. She traces this trend back to the Greece of the sixth century, BCE.

The past has been put to use by Theodorakis also, albeit in quite a different way than the repressive Greek governments. Many, if not most, of his great works, such as Symphony No. 1 (1948–1953), Epitaphios (1960), Mauthausen (1965), and Symphony No. 7 (1982) to name only a few, can be conceptualized as memorial art. These musical works stimulate memories and link them to trauma and tragedy. By using ordinary scenes from daily life they stay close to lived experience. But the ordinary scenes do not just act to recast the past as we remember it; they are reinserted into the present. They evoke the killings and execution of close friends in the context of the German occupation and the Greek Civil War (Symphony No. 1), a mother's lament for her son killed by the authorities in a tobacco workers' strike in 1936 (Epitaphios), a number tattoo on the arm of a girl imprisoned by the Nazi death machine (Mauthausen), and the courage and dignity of Athena, the female partisan, before and during her execution (Symphony No. 7). This memorial music creates a "potential space" in which the listener has an opportunity—perhaps even a responsibility—to create his or her own response. In my view, this potentiality generates a certain freedom for the listener. He or she is not told what to think and how to react. Theodorakis creates a climate for the lifting of the all too frequent denial and confusion surrounding such tragic historical events. He stimulates memories that governments often seek to repress, and in the process he memorializes the tragic events and the people involved in such events.

Theodorakis creates an intimate dialogue between himself and the listener. Composer and audience collaborate to create a memorializing dialogue by way of relational mourning. This dialogue affirms the powerful feelings of loss and death. It does not dissociate feelings from thinking, affects from words. It has the effect of holding the feelings of loss in a ritualized and social manner. The music Theodorakis composes serves to intensify the meaning of the words—having the effect, on a collective level, of lifting suppression and healing trauma. It also helps healing on an individual level, not unlike a therapeutic intervention. He does not compose music that is distant, abstract, and inaccessible; for Theodorakis,
relationships of the past are to be memorialized, celebrated, and accepted into the full human glory and tragedy. This generates a freedom for himself and for those who appreciate and participate in his music. Under such conditions, memorializing music is creative at its most caring and compassionate.

Codetta

Backstage after the Herodion concert, Lina received congratulations from many, including the composer. She was pleased with her performance. She had felt anxious when she first walked onto the stage, but then just dissociated. “I heard everything, the music was clear and I knew what I was doing, but I didn’t know. I think I was on automatic!” she exclaimed. She remembered only that she looked at the composer before and after the song. When the great Maria Farantouri approached her, we the witnesses, could tell that the moment was pregnant with intergenerational meaning. She kissed Lina on both cheeks and congratulated her, saying, “You have the tragic element. In the low ranges,” and pointed her finger to the earth. Then she pointed upward to the bright night sky. “And in the high ranges.”

Coda

In the summer days of 2010, Lina sings Theodorakis in different parts of Greece. She again performs Song of Songs. She is in even better voice and sings as if the song belongs to her and her alone. “It is my song,” she declares. Theodorakis recognizes this and enthusiastically says, “You are getting better and better.” He looks deeply into her eyes and adds, “Singing the Mauthausen songs in Greek and Hebrew is magnificent. The Greek people have difficulty understanding the Hebrew, but it expands their listening.” The composer is content. The performer feels recognized.

At her final summer performance, this time at the 85th birthday celebration for Mikis Theodorakis on July 29, the master of ceremonies introduces Lina to the 4,000 celebrants at the Lycabettus Hill outdoor theater as a “child of the Holocaust.” They applaud respectfully. As she begins, “How lovely is my love in her everyday dress...” an invisible, trembling wave moves across the theater and settles there amid the listeners. A new circle has been created.

At the end of the concert, Theodorakis responds to the standing ovation and moves towards the stage to sing with all the encore “On the secret seashore.” Before the song, he warmly thanks all at Lycabettus. And then he adds prophetically, “I want to remind you of something I once said—that a Greek needs to feel that he cannot retreat further. He moves back and back and when he touches the wall, then the Greek becomes either a traitor or a hero. Pay attention, because that moment will arrive for you, the younger generation. Choose!”

A few weeks later, Lina now back in the United States received the email below from Theodorakis.

My dear Lina,

I thank you very much for your participation at Lycabettus and your thrilling interpretation of Mauthausen.

Reading the “in-depth” interview you gave (9 August, 2010), I love and respect you even more, along with your amazing parents and especially your “witness” mother.

As you understand, the tragedy at the death camps is the most traumatic and torturous experience of my life. It goes beyond human comprehension and becomes a constant nightmare that has entered my blood, and is present every moment... And ever since fills me with ambivalences and fear for humankind. Because those who did these things were humans and also educated, nursed on Mozart, Beethoven and Wagner! Therefore, the Beast-Chaos is, it seems, stronger than the Harmony-Goodness-Love inside every human, ready to knock us down at every moment.

That which saved me was and is Music, that sublime gift to humans who can still be considered humans. Because most, especially today, possibly without wishing, slide towards Chaos.
You, like me, have two strong claims to hold you Upright, True and Strong in this distressing situation that surrounds us. Music and the Great Wound . . . So you have learned my secret: All my notes are nothing but blood which drips from my incurable wound. (Because to not forget that besides the Great Beast of the Nazis we had our own Beasts). So listening to you yesterday, my music abruptly became heartache . . .

It was all those innocent children that were led by women-beasts into the gas chambers and then they returned peacefully and well to their country, they had children, grandchildren, and drive around in Mercedes and now with money as a weapon they are in with the Bankers of Europe and of America like locusts on our land. It was not enough the 1,000,000 victims their grandfathers left behind, now they wish to the rest of our blood and to transform us into human shadows. The only things that are missing are the barbed wires, the numbers on our arms and the yellow star on the heart . . .

Lina, I love you and I thank you and I wish you now that you know the Divine Gift of Eros, to find happiness with the chosen one of your heart that Nicaraguan in New Jersey, while embracing Music and Song.

Kisses to you parents,

Mikis Theodorakis

Notes

19 Translation by Gail Holst-Warhaft.
20 Song of Songs is the first piece in the cycle The Ballad of Mauthausen. It is based in part on erotic passages from the Old Testament's Song of Songs. The second and third songs of The Ballad of Mauthausen tell of hard labor and escape. The final song, "When the war is over," is a fantasy of the lovers' union.
21 To see and hear the actual performance go to: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aqfzj1RohMI.
22 Ian Cross, "Music and Biocultural Evolution." In M. Clayton, T. Herbert, & R. Middleton (Eds.), The Cultural Study of Music (New York: Routledge, 2003),