

Opera as Social Medicine in Mikis Theodorakis' *Antigone*

In 1988, Greek composer, politician, and activist Mikis Theodorakis (b. 1925) embarked upon a trilogy of operas based on ancient dramas with female protagonists: *Medea* (1988-90), *Electra* (1993), and *Antigone* (1999). By this late stage in his career, Theodorakis was already revered as a prolific writer of Greek popular songs. His shift to opera, looking back to his early academic musical education in Athens and Paris, therefore represents at first glance a surprising creative turn. But Theodorakis' own writings about his 'woman' operas suggest a desire to transcend the purely artistic in favor of a distinctive political and cultural mission. In brief, Theodorakis seems to view his operatic projects as aspiring to a sociopolitical position in modern Greece very much akin to that of tragedy in ancient Athens (Holst-Warhaft 2001: 221-2).

Theodorakis himself was the librettist for his *Antigone*, drawing text from each of the three extant ancient tragedians: passages from Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, for example, appear in *Antigone*'s first act alone. This mixture of texts suggests that Theodorakis seeks to expand the referential scope of the opera beyond simple homage to a given playwright, and this is borne out in the composer's essays. Theodorakis, likely indebted to the *Poetics* in this elevation of the house of Oedipus to paradigmatic status, has written that he considers the Theban mythic cycle to be the "tragedy of tragedies." In it, Antigone, as an "innocent," struggles in vain against the "primordial Evil," the lust for power, symbolized by Creon (Theodorakis 2004). In this way the modern composer is reacting against the unrestrained desire for social and political domination that has oppressed and divided the Greek people since at least the Second World War. This emerges as early as Eteocles' first appearance in Act I, Scene 2, where Eteocles and the Chorus pray explicitly together for peace amongst the Greeks (Ferrario 2016: 205-6).

The myth of Antigone is therefore more than a convenient subject for the composer: the opera itself, and its heroine, represent an act of defiance, simultaneously embodying and constructing a pathway towards social unity. That Theodorakis believed in the power of art to achieve such a catharsis is clear from the way he describes, again implicitly acknowledging the *Poetics*, his own experience in composing the opera: “With *Antigone* I have the feeling that I am exorcising the primordial Evil, raising against it its image in miniature” (Theodorakis 2004). While this perspective may perhaps be ascribed in part to Theodorakis’ biographical experiences (he was active in the leftist political opposition between the Second World War and the fall of the *junta* – which had previously imprisoned him – in 1974), it is also an integral part of his personal artistic philosophy. In Theodorakis’ view, art participates in a transcendent force (perhaps with Platonic overtones) that he calls ‘Universal Harmony,’ and this Harmony also represents an aspirational state of elevation and peace for humankind (Theodorakis 2006). Antigone, as an innocent victim of tyranny and a courageous example of virtuous resistance, is fully aligned with Universal Harmony. She is thus a means by which her audiences can experience social, political, and cultural amelioration.

Despite the choice of an elevated and rarefied musical genre, the clear influences from ancient philosophy, and the careful, thoughtful harnessing of ancient drama, however, Theodorakis’ *Antigone* is intended to speak directly to the Greek people. The libretto itself is in modern Greek; the music deftly blends lyric and populizing influences in a tonal score designed for wide appeal, especially to those already familiar with Theodorakis’ own songs; and the texts chosen center around the themes of violation and division on the one hand, and identity, unity, and peace on the other. The work’s didactic purposes, while clearly informed by a sophisticated knowledge of the ancient tradition, are therefore open to all, with *Antigone* serving

simultaneously as a bridge across sociopolitical classes and as an invitation to the Greek people to rediscover and embrace their ancient heritage.

Bibliography

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