

Theodorakis visit: June 15,2015

Why do people have the natural desire to meet with superstars of diverse fields, talk to them and take their autographs? I believe that it comes down to sheer respect for their contribution and for having a chance to personally express their admiration and love for their work. Meeting celebrities is not easy since the “Superstars” are, in most cases, inaccessible to the general public for the obvious reasons. So, when the dream finally comes true, it is a major event with long-lasting memories.

My own admiration for the work of Mikis Theodorakis goes back more than 50 years. I have seen him perform live from a distance at various venues but never got close or had a chance to chat with him. Ten years ago I corresponded with his personal assistant and came close to setting-up a short visit, but alas, no luck. He had some medical issues at that time and a formal meeting was never scheduled.

A new opportunity had arisen a few months ago (May- June 2015). The International Society for Enzymology (ISE), a biomedical society promoting the use of enzymes in diagnostics, was having its annual conference in Corfu, Greece, from June 29 to July 1, 2015. The ISE executive, under the author’s leadership, decided to recognize Mikis contributions to the Greek and international culture by electing him as an honorary lifetime member. Mikis was not fit to travel to Corfu for the ceremony and we arranged to present him with his award at his home in Athens, 2 weeks earlier. Mikis graciously accepted our award but refused the monetary component of \$2,000 and asked us to make a charitable donation to an organization of our choice.

On June 15, 2015, we made the trip to his home. Present were myself and my wife Anastasia, Dr. Panos and Sofronis Papanastasiou, Dr. Steven Boyages and his wife Stella (from Australia) and Dr. Andreas Scorilas. We were also accompanied by a photographer and a videographer. When we arrived at 6 pm, Mikis assistant, who also arranged the meeting, was concerned that we were too many, and mentioned that Mikis’s doctor recommended no more than 3 people in his room at any time. But in the end, we were all allowed to enter. The meeting was scheduled to be “short” (about 5 min) but it went for almost 2 ½ hours. We took the tiny elevator from the kitchen on the ground floor to the third floor, three persons at a time, to arrive to Mikis living room. When we entered, we saw Mikis sitting comfortably on a lazyboy-style chair, his feet covered with a blanket. The view from his apartment was spectacular. He had totally unobstructed view of the Acropolis and the Parthenon.

Responding to our compliments on the view, Mikis was quick in acknowledging that he is not afraid to die and that the only thing he would miss was the view of Acropolis. He mentioned how happy he was to find this house at this stage of his life and he believed the house was destined to be his last residence.

After giving him a bucket of flowers and the presentation of the award, and taking some pictures and video, I broke the ice by telling him a story on how I started listening to his music when I was about twelve years old. At that time, 1964 or so, I was cutting my hair in a barber shop at Agios Athanasios, Cyprus. I generally hated this, but one day, the barber took a vinyl LP and started playing it. I didn’t know what it was but the music had a rebellious rhythm and beautiful melody and the bouzouki and the man’s

voice were magic. I loved it so much, I was begging my father to take me for a haircut every week; hoping to listen to this music again. I later found that the record was "Romiossini", one of the best Greek LPs ever recorded. Mikis was very amused with this story.

We then continued the discussion on music and other issues and Mikis became quite talkative. He spoke about his childhood, his family, which did not have a musical vein; they were a family of doctors and lawyers. His likeness of music was natural and he mentioned starting composition around the age of twelve. He commented that his father was very proud when announcing in family and local events that they will listen to a music piece composed by his ...son. He struggled to buy a violin due to financial difficulties and he was conducting a church choir at 15.

### Canto General

I asked him how it was possible to compose a monumental piece, Canto General, without knowing the Spanish language. He said that he knew some Spanish and that the music he wrote was hidden in the language and the poem of Pablo Neruda. I commented that in my view, Canto General was far superior to Carl Orff's Carmina Burana and I was astonished to hear from Mikis that his producer (who also produced Carmina Burana) felt exactly the same. He mentioned that his producer also felt that his 6 symphonies were superior to Mahler's symphonies. I confessed to have no knowledge of his classical music contributions but when the next week I went to Crete for a scientific conference, a friend/delegate who is very knowledgeable about classical music and heard of our visit, told me that Mikis symphonies are very well-known to him and are highly regarded. A few days later I listened to his 3<sup>rd</sup> symphony and I was very impressed.

Around the Canto General theme he mentioned his friendship with Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. He said that Castro was still sending him monthly, Cuban cigars! He then told us stories about Chile's then President, Alliente. He said that General Pinochet was a confidant of Alliente, before he organized a coup that led to Alliente's death. He was writing the music for Canto General on the plane from Chile to Greece and also commented on the sudden death of Neruda and mentioned that during Neruda's funeral, one of the birds that he describes in his poem dropped dead to his grave.

I mentioned that my favourite pieces from Canto General were La United Fruit Company and America Insurrecta and he concurred.

When I asked him how much time it takes to write a song, he said that the best songs are those which come instantaneously from inspiration, without much thought.

### Stelios Kazantzidis vs Grigoris Bithikotsis

Mikis said that he knew Stelios since his youth and that Stelios was a communist. He said that the two used to drive around and sing "antartika" songs as a way of resistance to the then Metaxas dictatorship. When I asked about Stelios voice he was initially hesitant to answer but then he said "Theiki foni" (God's voice). He said that Stelios did not like Bithikotsis or had any respect for him and he was calling him "Mannavis" (somebody selling fruits and vegetables). He said that in the 60s, Stelios was singing at a music shop every night and making 5,000 drachmas per night, a huge amount at that time. Bithikotsis

then went across the street singing in a different shop for 50 drachmas per night and the shop went bankrupt in 3 months. He said that Stelios stopped singing publicly, not so much for the reasons mentioned in his interviews (poor people could not come, noise, smoke etc.) but because he suffered from severe agoraphobia. He was visiting him frequently at Agios Konstantinos, where Kazantzidis was living and fishing.

Kazantzidis wanted Theodorakis to have him exclusive but Mikis chose Bithikotsis for his great songs and Stelios wanted to counteract this by singing with Hatzidakis; but Hatzidakis did not have the songs.

Once, Theodorakis assembled a group of exclusively male singers and planned to go around Greece for a tour with projected big profits; these singers included Bithikotsis, Mitropanos, Pouloupoulos and Kalogiannis but when Stelios heard that Bithikotsis was on the list, he declined to participate.

I amused Mikis by showing a video of my student orchestra playing the song “ke den milise kanis” from the brilliant album “Stin Anatoli” with Stelios Kazantzidis. He seemed impressed and asked how I managed to remove Stelios voice from the track while retaining the instrumental part.

### **Mikis and Sidney Lumet**

Sidney Lumet was one of the most accomplished movie directors at Hollywood. He wanted Mikis to write the music score for his movie “Serpico” starring the then young, Al Pacino. Mikis told us that it was impossible to focus on this project at the time due to multiple performances in USA and Lumet settled for an already written score “Dromi Palii”. He said that Lumet paid \$5,000 and provided a young musician (Bob James) to make the song arrangements. Mikis mentioned that Bob James later became successful and that he liked his arrangements very much. He said that Lumet was dressed very simple and the first time he was going to meet him, he walked at a shooting scene and looked for him. He found two men there, and he decided to speak to the better dressed one; but he was the cleaner! The worst dressed one was Lumet. Few know that Mikis score of Serpico was nominated for a Grammy Award and that Pacino won his first Golden Globe for the movie.

Mikis said that Al Pacino loved Greece and his music and wanted to perform as a Narrator at an Epidaurus show based on his music but that the Greek Ministry of Culture never sponsored it, and the event never happened.

### **Mikis and Bouzouki players**

We posed the question as to whom he thought was his best bouzouki player and although he said that Papadopoulos and Karnezis were great, that Manolis Hiotis was the best by far. He said that Hiotis introduced new ways of playing, new chords etc. and that he was very, very fast and played clean. But he lost him for some time around 1965 since Hiotis went for performances in USA. He then described Hiotis death as follows: it was an evening of .....1967 and Mikis was a prisoner of the Greek Military Dictatorship in Oropos, a village outside Athens. That evening, Mikis was walking in the veranda, outside of his cell, and he suddenly heard from a distance bouzouki playing of his song “Se potisa rodostamo”. He realized from the style that it was Hiotis, who had a property in Oropos but was not a prisoner. The next day he heard that Hiotis died from heart attack.

## **The Great Greek Poets**

We asked Mikis as to whom he believed was the greatest poet from the group of three, Seferis, Ritsos and Elytis. He said, "I believe Seferis" but we were all very surprised when he elaborated further saying that still, the better of all three was Konstantinos Kavafis. When I asked as to why he did not try to write music on Kavafis poems, he said that Kavafis poems were not suitable as lyrics for music; but that he did write background music while Maria Farantouri was reading his poetry. This work, which was never released, is available on Mikis website at .....

## **Epilogue**

A great intellectual and a great artist is now an elder statesman in Greece, but his music is here to stay, forever. I experienced many times the natural love of diverse people for Mikis music. Last week I was in Plaka at a restaurant with live music and one old lady asked the band to play the Mikis song "Kaymos". I asked the lady why she requested this song and she said that she loved Theodorakis music and that she was...Argentinian. Recently, I was shopping at a grocery store in Cyprus and the song "Myrtia" was playing in the background a young worker was singing it. Most music comes and goes but in my estimation Mikis music, as Giorgos Zambetas put it, will remain for centuries, like the Parthenon in the Acropolis.

Completed July 4, 2015