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FROM COLD WAR POLITICS TO COVID-19 POLICIES: TRANSFORMATION AND CANONIZATION OF ART MUSIC IN GREECE, 1950–2020¹

Abstract: In this paper, the ever-changing perspectives of Greek art music are viewed from a retrospective standpoint both in the realm of transcending borders between centers and peripheries of 20th-century European music traditions and under the fluid context of social, ideological and cultural particularities of the Greek state during the

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second half of the 20th and the early 21st centuries. The identification of domestic cultural policies, whether impacted by foreign affairs, economics, or even the pandemic, undergoes cross-referencing with musical identities, trends, creative output, and institutions, in order to produce an interdisciplinary analysis of post-1950 music history and its key protagonists in Modern Greece.

Keywords: historiography, Greek music, modernism, cultural politics, institutions, musical life, Hadjidakis, Theodorakis, higher education, COVID-19

On 31 March 1950, a period where the early sociocultural markers of the Cold War were already being outlined in Europe, a concert of vocal and chamber music works by the recently-deceased composer Nikos Skalkottas (1904–1949) was held at Parnassos Hall, Athens. Performers included Loukia Heva, mezzo-soprano, and John G. Papaoioannou on the piano, who introduced four out of the *16 Songs* for voice and piano, a major vocal cycle by Skalkottas, composed in 1941 during the first month of the Axis Occupation in Greece. At a turning point of Skalkottas's postwar reappraisal,² music critics still seemed preoccupied by the atonal expressionist idiom of the pioneer of prewar Greek musical modernism. Among them was a 25-year-old newly-appointed music critic named Manos Hadjidakis, who wrote in the Athenian newspaper *Oi Kairoi* (*The Times*) on 4 April 1950:

Mrs. Loukia Heva sang with her rich and ripe voice four songs that made us wonder what the purpose of their creation was, and what the composer was struggling to manifest through these incomplete vocal contributions.³

² The international dissemination of Skalkottas's creative output during the first decade after his death (from the 1950s onward) and the recognition of its value and significance, in contrast to the artistic marginalization he experienced while alive, quickly established him in the public eye as the “proto-martyr” of the interwar Greek musical avant-garde and an archetypal figure for the emerging postwar generation. Petros Vouvaris, “Traversing Melancholy: Skalkottas Reads *Esperas*”, in: Polina Tambakaki, Panos Vlagopoulos, Katerina Levidou, and Roderick Beaton (Eds), *Music, Language and Identity in Greece: Defining a National Art Music in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, London – New York, Routledge, 2020, 211.

³ Giorgos Sakallieros, *Perspectives of Musical Modernism in Greece during the 20th Century. People, Trends, Works, Institutions* [Ὅψεις του μουσικού μοντερνισμού στον ελληνικό 20ό αιώνα. Πρόσωπα, ρεύματα, έργα, θεσμοί], Athens, Kallipos, Open Academic Editions, 2023, 240, <http://dx.doi.org/10.57713/kallipos-178>

It would take about twenty years for Hadjidakis, a composer of popular music but also a dedicated advocate of the musical avant-garde and its people in Greece in the 1960s, to state in an interview from New York in 1969:

After Skalkottas, who indubitably was the greatest Greek composer, new music is exemplified by Iannis Xenakis and Jani Christou. Today, these two “Yannides” are the greatest Greek musicians.⁴

Hadjidakis’ antinomic remarks about Skalkottas do not come as a surprise for those who are cognizant of the developments of the musical avant-garde in post-1950 Greece. Restrictive frameworks, like contextual “borders”, emerged through historical facts as incentives that early Modern-Greek historiography initially adopted, failed to avoid, but later began overcoming. Examples occurred frequently, as in the year 1949, where at least three events have been recorded as historiographical crossroads: Skalkottas died unexpectedly, still fully creative; Hadjidakis gave his historical lecture about the cultural reappraisal of *rebetiko*; and Christou presented the first landmark work of Greek postwar symphonic modernism – *Phoenix Music* (Image 1a/b/c). The year 1949 also marked the end of the Greek Civil War and predicated Greece’s subjection to NATO and the Western angle of Cold War polarity, events that brought about significant changes in a country that was becoming a European field for the exercise of US foreign policies, and simultaneously a spot for modern expressions of a colonial-type cultural diplomacy. A wide array of actions were applied at the time regarding funding and strengthening of domestic cultural life, mainly through economically-powerful private institutions and organizations from the United States.⁵ Such actions significantly influenced the music establishment in Greece, regarding both existing institutions as well as the new ones that the changes in the cultural and political environment required to be created.

⁴ Konstantinos Zouliatis, “The Philosophical and Musical Thought of Jani Christou (1926–1970) as Derived from his Manuscripts” [«Η φιλοσοφική και μουσική σκέψη του Γιάννη Χρήστου (1926–1970) όπως προκύπτει από τα χειρόγραφα του»], doctoral dissertation, Ionian University, 2018, 131, <https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/45178>, accessed 12 March 2025.

⁵ Zinovia Lialiouti, *The “Other” Cold War. American Cultural Diplomacy in Greece, 1953–1973* [Ο «άλλος» Ψυχρός Πόλεμος. Η αμερικανική πολιτιστική διπλωματία στην Ελλάδα, 1953–1973], Heraklion, Crete University Press, 2019, 126–137.

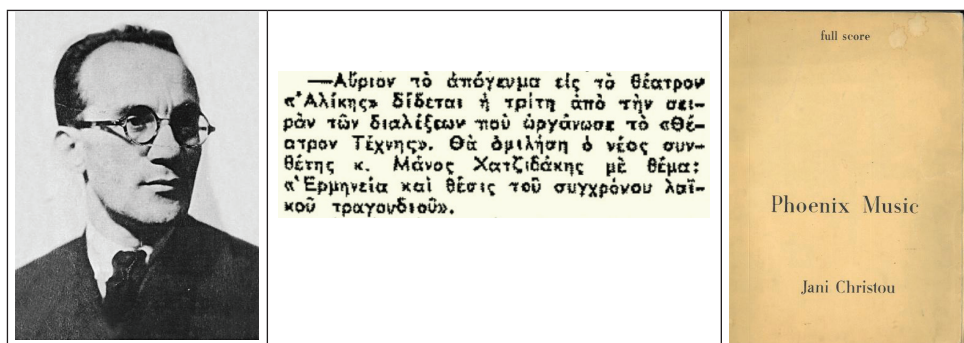


Image 1a/b/c. Left (1a): Nikos Skalkottas in a photograph from the period 1938–40.⁶ Center (1b): The announcement of Manos Hadjidakis’ lecture at the Art Theatre, published in the newspaper *Empros* (30 January 1949).⁷ Right (1c): Cover of the autographed manuscript of Yannis Christou’s work *Phoenix Music* (1949, composer’s archive)⁸

Focusing on people – be it leading figures or representatives of different trends and ideologies – evidence already arrives from Hadjidakis’ references to Skalkottas, Xenakis and Christou. In a lecture about the “Greek School of Contemporary Music” in the mid-1970s, the composer Yorgo Sicilianos claimed that although Greek composers of his generation came across questioning art and life in a more universalist than local perspective, they “*did not abolish their ‘national characteristics of mentality and way of thinking’ but used them as tools of identification and cultural survival within the moral and art values’ crisis of the contemporary world*”.⁹ As a characteristic example, one might mention their multifarious references to Greek classical antiquity, re-

⁶ Image 1a source: Eva Mantzourani, *The Life and Twelve-Note Music of Nikos Skalkottas*, Farnham – Burlington, Ashgate, 60.

⁷ Image 1b source: Φώντας Τρούσας, “What Exactly Had Hadjidakis Lectured Upon Rebetiko in 1949?” [«Τι ακριβώς είχε πει ο Μάνος Χατζιδάκις για το “ρεμπέτικο” σ’ εκείνη την περίφημη διάλεξή του το 1949»], εφ. *LiFO* (31. 1. 2025), <https://www.lifo.gr/culture/music/ti-akribos-eihe-pei-o-hatzidakis-gia-rempetikos-ekini-tin-perifimi-di-alexi-toy-1949>, accessed 3 February 2025.

⁸ The *Jani Christou Archive* is preserved at the Research and Documentation Center (KETOA) of the Athens Conservatory, <https://www.athensconservatoire.gr/2023/09/αρχείο-γιάννη-χρήστου-στο-ωδείο/>.

⁹ Yorgo Sicilianos, *For Music [Για τη μουσική]*, edited by Elli Giotopoulou-Sicilianou, Athens, Benaki Museum – Hellenic Music Centre, 2011, 271–272.

shaped through modern forms and contemporary ideas and trends, and observed under a completely modern, autonomous, and distinctive creative identity in the context of the European postwar avant-garde.¹⁰

Xenakis and Christou quickly stood out, as they were early to engage and establish strong connections with the European world of modern aesthetic and philosophical ideas in the 1950s, while expanding and evolving these ties over time. Their international recognition, combined with the autonomous and rather “solitary” nature of each one’s idiosyncratic personality, as well as the interdisciplinary ways in which they approached music and across miscellaneous fields (philosophy, mathematics, architecture, early computer programming, psychology, theosophy, happenings), positioned them differently from other representatives of the domestic avant-garde. From a historiographical point of view this positioning was an inevitable necessity, making Xenakis and Christou the role models who naturally had to emerge.¹¹ It is telling that audiences at avant-garde concerts in Athens perceived them as antagonists.¹² As early as 1962, Manos Hadjidakis, a proponent and supporter of Greek musical modernism, recognized in Xenakis a historic opportunity: an artist who could express the Greek spirit in the Western world under a universalist dimension.¹³ He seemed to maintain this view for years, as evidenced in the aforementioned 1969 interview from New York and in his references to the great names of the Greek musical avant-garde (Skalkottas, Xenakis, Christou).

However, this demand for a leading figure to express the Greek spirit in the Western world under a universalist perspective, as also manifested by domestic institutions, the press and even state authorities, created polarities and antagonism in the postwar music milieu, often concealing the composers’ deeper creative interrelations and endeavors. A closer, critical inspection

¹⁰ Kostas Chardas, “International vs. National? Issues of (Hellenic/Greek) Identity within Greek Musical Modernism (1950s–1970s)”, in: Nikos Maliaras (Ed.), *The National Element in Music* (Conference Proceedings, Athens, 18–20 January 2013), Athens, University of Athens, Faculty of Music Studies – Friends of Music Society, 2014, 347. Accessed 22 January 2025, <http://nem2013.music.uoa.gr/NEMproc2013.pdf>

¹¹ John Svolos, “Greek Musical Modernism: Origins and Descendants” [“Μια απόπειρα ερμηνείας των καταβολών της μουσικής πρωτοπορίας στην Ελλάδα”], *Polyphonia*, 14, 2009, 178.

¹² Katy Romanou, *Greek Art Music in Modern Times* [Εντεχνη ελληνική μουσική στους νεότερους χρόνους], Athens, Koultoura, 2006, 245.

¹³ Ioannis Tsagkarakis, “The Politics of Culture: Historical Moments in Greek Musical Modernism”, doctoral dissertation, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2013, 131–132, <https://bit.ly/3K8wCCg>, accessed 17 February 2025.

might reveal a remapping of borders upon identities, styles or repertoires, or between the “high”, the popular or other cultural perspectives.

In the 1960s, while the avant-garde was being promoted as the leading trend of the domestic art-music scene, Mikis Theodorakis (1925–2021) and Manos Hadjidakis (1925–1994)¹⁴ were becoming international symbols of Greek music by reaffirming the relationship of folk and popular song with high poetry, art music, a political blend and interaction with visual and performing arts. A new concept of Greek identity centered its quest for self-definition on the artistic and ideological assimilation of a heterogeneous blend of poetic form and the modes of urban-popular songs (as opposed to rural folk songs or the Byzantine chant).¹⁵ This blending created an artistic context that aimed at bridging the elitist “high” with the (urban) popular “folk” and its hybrid manifestation – the seemingly paradoxical term “*en-techno laiko*” (“art-popular” song) – outside the framework of the international avant-garde. The aesthetic legitimization of a new national tradition gained international recognition and exposure while also resonating with a broad domestic audience.¹⁶ Hadjidakis’ 1949 lecture on the cultural importance of rebetiko referred to a fringed, lower-class genre of popular music discarded by both the right-wing 1936 Ioannis Metaxas regime and also by the Communist Party in the 1940s as degenerate. Theodorakis, a communist himself, adapted the folk idiom of rebetiko within Modern Greek poetry and art-music elements, producing a vast songwriting output decisively blended with political protest. Although presented as antagonists in the press and the public eye, the two composers had become friends in the 1940s, as active members of the United Panhellenic Organization of Youth (EPON), during the Axis Occupation and Greek Civil War. Both their views on music and art, as well as their creative output, embodied aesthetic and political perspectives that profoundly influenced postwar Greek urban popular culture – extending beyond the boundaries of music itself and the defined repertoires associated with it.¹⁷

¹⁴ The year 2025 marks the centenary of the birth of both Theodorakis and Hadjidakis, a fact with a certain impact on the content of this paper and its author.

¹⁵ Kostas Chardas, *On 20th-Century Greek Music. Historical, Analytical, Aesthetic Approaches* [Για την ελληνική μουσική του 20ού αιώνα – Ιστορικές, αναλυτικές, αισθητικές προσεγγίσεις], Athens, Kallipos, Open Academic Editions, 2024, 155–56, <http://dx.doi.org/10.57713/kallipos-1038>

¹⁶ Dimitris Papanikolaou, *Singing Poets: Literature and Popular Music in France and Greece*, London, Legenda, 2007, 95–96.

¹⁷ Sakallieros, *Perspectives of Musical Modernism in Greece during the 20th Century*, op. cit., 227.

In 1947, while in political exile on the island of Ikaria and still a student of the Athens Conservatory, Theodorakis exchanged letters with Hadjidakis. In one of them he first discussed the composition of a symphonic ballet titled *Helliniki Apokria (Carnival)*. At the time, the 22-year-old Theodorakis was striving to incorporate folk and modal material into a large symphonic form colorfully orchestrated, years before his turn from art-music composition to political songwriting. The work was actually commissioned in 1952 by choreographer Rallou Manou, a collaborator of Hadjidakis, and was first performed in full stage production with her company Hellenic Choreodrama in 1954 at the Opera of Rome, conducted by Andreas Paridis. The story of the ballet was inspired by the old carnival festivities in prewar Athens, evoking the nostalgic climate of an urban-folk setting. In Theodorakis' own words:

Immediately afterward [author's note: after being in political exile, from 1947], I began systematically collecting urban folk songs. At the same time, in terms of my studies and my path within symphonic music, I had already completed my theoretical studies at the Athens Conservatory, and between 1944 and 1947, I composed my first chamber music works and my initial symphonic orchestra attempts. Thus, I intended to combine these two main musical trends: on one hand, the technique of symphonic music, as taught in conservatories and heard in the works of symphonists – particularly those of various national “schools” – and on the other hand, the urban folk music idioms.

Section III of the ballet's sixth movement is titled “Camel”, a people's carnival dance around a camel effigy. After a brief introduction, Theodorakis quotes the well-known arpeggiated and rhythmically-dotted pattern of the “Dance of the Knights” from Sergei Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, probably as homage to the Soviet composer who died in 1953.¹⁸ In measure 16 of this particular section of the work, right above the first violins' staff, the composer inscribes: “À la mémoire de Prokofiev.” A facsimile excerpt from Theodorakis' orchestral score is provided, where the connection to Prokofiev's well-known passage is unmistakable (see Image 2).

¹⁸ Prokofiev passed away on 5 March 1953, the same day as the leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin – a fact that clearly carried ideological and aesthetic significance for the communist and politically active young Theodorakis, which he conveys through musical means.



Image 2. Mikis Theodorakis, *Helliniki Apokria* (*Carnival*, symphonic ballet, 1953). Part VI – Section III (“Camel”). Autographed manuscript of the orchestral score, mm. 16–24.¹⁹

But this is not the only example of musical borrowing here. The French-oriented orchestration in *Carnival* is evoked by the solo saxophone to which Theodorakis assigns the second theme, accompanied by the flutes, celesta and an ethereal strings’ tremolo (Image 3).²⁰

¹⁹ The autographed manuscript of the work is available in the *Mikis Theodorakis Archive*, Digital Cultural Repository of the Friends of Music Society, Music Library of Greece (<https://shorturl.at/yp6nr>, last accessed 8 March 2024).

²⁰ It is a simple yet highly distinctive motif which, in terms of timbre and orchestration, is presented in exquisite fashion, possibly to such an extent that it prompted the Greek National School composer Petros Petridis to advise Theodorakis, in his review in the newspaper *Kathimerini* (November 22, 1953, regarding the performance of the work by the Athens State Orchestra exactly a week earlier, on November 15): “[...] not to be

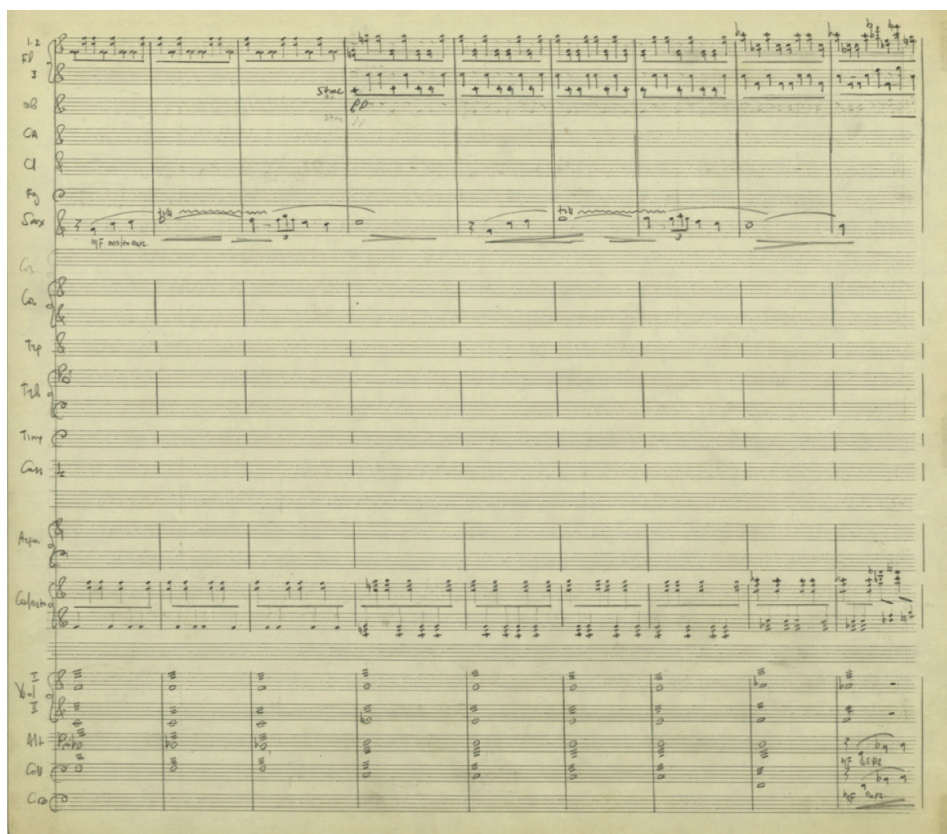


Image 3. Mikis Theodorakis, *Helliniki Apokria* (*Carnival*, symphonic ballet, 1953). Part VI – Section III (“Camel”). Autographed manuscript of the orchestral score, mm. 42–50.²¹

This theme is widely known to Greek audiences – but not from Theodorakis. Greek audiences may easily recognize the melody of a very popular song by Hadjidakis called “To pelago einai vathy” (lit. “The sea is deep”), recorded by the world-renowned Greek female performer Nana Mouskouri in 1961. Hadjidakis publicly admitted borrowing Theodorakis’ theme when he himself conducted *Carnival*, some thirty years later, on 27 March 1990 with the Orchestra of Colours. In the printed program he highlighted:

overly seduced by the siren song of orchestration at the expense of musical ideas.” In: Asteris Koutoulas (Ed.), *The Musical Theodorakis. Texts – Works – Critique, 1937-1996* [Ο μουσικός Θεοδωράκης. Κείμενα – Εργογραφία – Κριτική, 1937–1996], Athens, Editions “Nea Synora” – A. Livanis, 1998, 301.

²¹ Autographed manuscript of the work, digitally available, *Mikis Theodorakis Archive*: (<https://shorturl.at/yp6nr>, last accessed 8 March 2024).

The “Camel” includes this magnificent saxophone theme that I consciously “stole” to write my own song “To pelago einai vathy” [lit. “The sea is deep”], believing that – in Stravinsky’s words – “Lesser artists borrow, great artists steal”.²²

This short musical extract invites remarks concerning the blurring and crossing of boundaries. The Prokofiev quotation by Theodorakis reflects the neo-classical perspective of an art-music symphonic prototype moulded into a parodic representation of an urban-folk setting, thus comprehended as an early shred of postmodernism. The employment of singing tunes in symphonic works – very common in Theodorakis – evokes his early compilation attempts at reforming popular music culture while retaining his reputation as an art-music composer. Then, Hadjidakis’ borrowing of Theodorakis’ symphonic theme, used as song material, also serves a crossing of boundaries between the “high” and “low”, the “art” and the “popular”, where artistic identification and ideology are intermediated in the most tangible manner possible.

Hadjidakis’ and Theodorakis’ international stature in the 1960s, mainly resulting from the music they wrote for the films *Never on Sunday* (1960) and *Zorba, the Greek* (1964), directed by Jules Dassin and Michael Cacoyannis respectively, was so influential that it even reflected an image of Greece abroad, especially as a tourist product and destination. The Greek National Tourism Organization (in Greek: EOT) constitutes a typical example of the state’s annexation to the Western camp during the Cold War, as its foundation was included among the 32 legislative decrees the American Porter Mission demanded from the Greek government in September 1950 as part of Greece’s inclusion in the Marshall Plan.²³ In the 1950s and 1960s, tourism and paid holidays were considered as economic parameters that allowed the inflow of foreign exchange and regional development in countries with natural beauty and historical culture, such as Greece. Tourism also contributed to the stereotypical and, subsequently, commoditized versions of national identity in each country where it developed, as a large-scale homogenizing political, social and cultural mechanism.²⁴

²² Concert program of the Orchestra of Colours: 1st Cycle, 4th Concert, 27 March 1990 (Thessaloniki) and 28 March 1990 (Athens). Quoted in: Koutoulas, op. cit., 304.

²³ Sakallieros, *Perspectives of Musical Modernism in Greece during the 20th Century*, op. cit., 284.

²⁴ Areti Adamopoulou, *Art and Cold-War Diplomacy. International Art Exhibitions in Athens (1950–1967)* [Τέχνη και ψυχροπολεμική διπλωματία. Διεθνείς εικαστικές εκθέσεις στην Αθήνα (1950–1967)], Thessaloniki, University Studio Press, 2019, 81–82.

Through the Epidaurus and Athens Festivals (founded in 1954 and 1955, respectively), EOT promoted the country's culture and tourism abroad, acquainted the Greek public with the international art scene, while also creating a hub for the ideological connection of postwar Greek culture with the architectural landmarks of its birth, namely of ancient Greece. The Athens Festival hosted concerts of new music organized by the Hellenic Association of Contemporary Music (HACM), while EOT financially contributed to the materialization of three of the five Hellenic Weeks of Contemporary Music (1966, 1967, 1976), the Xenakis Week (1975) and the ISCM World Music Days (1979), the high points of domestic avant-garde music activities in the 1960s and 1970s.²⁵ Furthermore, in EOT's more mass-culture tourist spectacles, such as Sound and Light (in collaboration with the French company Philips) – capitalizing on ancient Greek history and its monuments (Acropolis) as part of the legacy of Western civilization in the context of the Cold War – Greek art-music composers also contributed (Petros Petridis in 1959 and Dimitris Dragatakis in 1972).²⁶

Reconsidering Sicilianos' assertion regarding the generation of postwar Greek composers' and their "*national characteristics of mentality and way of thinking*",²⁷ one may trace a mediated interrelation that links inspiration and artistic creativity up with the mutual interdependence between cultural policies and economy. Today's more neoliberal principles of collaboration between public sector and private initiatives in the field of artistic and cultural economics were not so obvious back then; yet, the participation of the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations or the foreign cultural institutes established in Greece in the 1950s (e.g. Goethe Institute) in the development of the postwar Greek musical avant-garde scene, along with EOT and Greek Ministries, certainly did not discourage the blending of indigenous contemporary artistic production with the reappraisal of the ancient Greek past; it served both the state's development of a national cultural industry and Cold War cultural policies.

²⁵ Cf. Kostas Chardas and Giorgos Sakallieros, "Musical Modernism in Greece. An Overview", in: Eva Mantzourani, Costas Tsougras, and Petros Vouvaris (Eds), *Perspectives on Greek Musical Modernism*, London – New York, Routledge, 2025, 57–59, and Sakallieros, *Perspectives of Musical Modernism in Greece during the 20th Century*, op. cit., 284–290, 294–299.

²⁶ Magdalini Kalopana, "Dimitris Dragatakis – Catalogue of Works" [«Δημήτρης Δραγατάκης: Κατάλογος έργων»], doctoral dissertation, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, 2008, 446–47. Accessed 12 January 2025,

²⁷ Sicilianos, op. cit., 272.

Greek composers' turn to musical creation related to Ancient Greece after 1950 is multifaceted, ranging from incidental music for ancient drama performances to prototypes inspired by ancient myth and poetry, as well as incentives for new orchestral and vocal works, ballets, chamber or electronic music works. This "transnational universalist hellenicity" remapping the borders of the present with the past was achieved by simultaneous crossings: the employment of ancient Greek measures, rhythms, tetrachords, pentatonic scales, or archaic-oriented instruments, exploited in modernist style through human voice and body, stage gestures and improvisation, novel instrumental performance techniques, timbral combinations, and electronic media, in a large number of works by the majority of the composers of the period: Xenakis, Christou, Dragatakis, Papaioannou, Sicilianos, Kounadis, Antoniou, Vasiliadis, and Kouroupos among others.²⁸

The 1981 national elections in Greece brought the first socialist government to power. The Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and its charismatic leader Andreas Papandreou (1919–1996) marked the beginning of a period of radical changes in Greek society, with special regard to the economic and cultural redefinition of the middle class. A forerunner of these changes was Greece's accession to the European Economic Community (then European Union), signed by former prime minister Konstantinos Karamanlis (1907–1998) in 1979.²⁹ Recent studies comprehend cultural policy and the economic state of affairs with reference to the Greek music scene from 1980 to the first years of the indigenous economic crisis (2009) as defined by the commercialization of music at all levels along with standardization of music genres and their audiences. Increased cultural financing from state and European resources to ensembles, institutions and individuals often implied elitism and social/political favoritism.³⁰

The definition of the "postmodern" in post-1980 Greek art music mainly expresses a revision towards the "uniquely new" and the "aesthetics of rupture" which dominated the 1960s and 1970s domestic scene, acquiring a character of questioning and self-repeal at least in terms of technical means and aesthetic standards. The re-evaluation of past and present, boundaries

²⁸ Chardas and Sakallieros, op. cit., 59–62.

²⁹ John S. Koliopoulos and Thanos M. Veremis, *Greece: The Modern Sequel. From 1821 to the Present*, London, Hurst & Co, 2004, 335–337.

³⁰ Cf. Tsagkarakis, op. cit., 254–58, and Markos Tsetsos, *Modern Greek Art Music. Essays on Ideological and Institutional Criticism* [Νεοελληνική Μουσική. Δοκίμια ιδεολογικής και θεσμικής κριτικής], Athens, Panas Music, 2013, 128–132.

between “high-low” culture, irony and the parodic element, all defined Greek composers’ more critical stance against established and elitist postwar avant-garde norms. In the 1980s, several representatives of the first postwar generation (born in the 1910s and 1920s, e.g. Y. Sicilianos, Y. A. Papaioannou, D. Dragatakis) seemed to undergo a revision of their musical syntax and overall creative direction, with an emphasis on the melodic element – especially when expressed by the human voice, a return to traditional instrumental forms or operas, as well as blends of modality with timbral density depending on morphological design or instrumental selections.³¹ The replacement of emphasis upon structural conception, a key element of the postwar modernism of the 1960s and 1970s, with a more intense effort to communicate ideas, emotions, and expressive gestures in the domestic art-music scene during the last two decades of the 20th century defined new codification in the revised musical syntax of younger representatives born in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g. Y. Zervos, H. Vrontos, I. Papadatos and Ph. Tsalachouris, to name just a few). This period was also marked by a broadening of the activities of the Greek Composers Union and the all-embracing figure of its president, Theodore Antoniou (1935–2018), a talented composer, dedicated pedagogue, avid performer, and skilled administrator.³²

Furthermore, a radical change in music education – the institutionalization of musicological research in academia – greatly contributed to the overall perception of music in Greece from the 1980s onwards. The first department of Music Studies in Greece accepted its first students in 1985 at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The Athens and Ionian universities followed in 1991 and 1992 respectively. Early on, Greek art-musical life and creation were put at the center of academic activities, and their historical, systematic, aesthetic and interdisciplinary perspectives significantly expanded in the two decades that followed. Besides teaching and published research, the constantly increasing number of new doctoral dissertations on Greek art music submitted after 2000 considerably remapped the historiographical field of indigenous academic research and brought a whole new generation of musicologists to the forefront in a period of just two decades.³³

The art-music climate in Greece was significantly reinvigorated from the 1990s and after due to the foundation of new cultural institutions, with the

³¹ Chardas and Sakallieros, op. cit., 63–64.

³² Sakallieros, *Perspectives of Musical Modernism in Greece during the 20th Century*, op. cit., 352–57.

³³ Sakallieros, *ibid.*, 373.

Athens Concert Hall (Megaron), which opened its doors in 1991, still retaining its prominence. The venue soon became a home for world-class ensembles, soloists, and a new music library, as well as a meeting point for upper-class Athenians with cultural concerns. Operated as a center of a wide-ranging musical culture based on Western art-music values, Megaron appealed to the Greek people as both a venue of social democratization and a hub of “cultural hegemony” where the state’s art-music cultural policies were literally dictated for more than 20 years.³⁴

However, the criticism Megaron attracted regarding political reciprocations, favoritism, and financial management clearly showed the indigenous instability of cultural life when heavily dependant on state funds. It also enhanced, from both the politicians’ and the public’s viewpoint, a more critical gaze into the relations of economy and culture regarding public and private endowments and, for the first time, the profitability of cultural institutions. The economic crisis of 2009 allowed for more neoliberal policies to prevail in Greece that eventually led to the temporary shutdown of the national Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation (ERT) by the right-wing coalition government in 2013, also the decline of music ensembles like the Orchestra of Colours founded by Hadjidakis in 1989.³⁵ Organizations and institutes, orchestras and music ensembles, cultural agents and musicians were all affected by the 2009 crisis. Rescheduling, cancellations and repetitions of successful productions were employed in order to control expenses. The unemployment rate among musicians, especially younger ones, significantly increased. Alternative ways to produce and perform music led to redesignations of venues, groups and repertoires, in efforts towards audience expansion.³⁶

The Greek National Opera (GNO) provides a more optimistic example of cultural survival during the years of economic crisis. Under the appointment of conductor Myron Michailidis as artistic director in 2011, GNO or-

³⁴ Eva Fourlanou, “The Athens Concert Hall: Bridging Art and Education” [«To Μέγαρο Μουσικής Αθηνών: μια γέφυρα ανάμεσα στην τέχνη και την εκπαίδευση»], *Polyphonia*, 26, 2015, 166.

³⁵ Giorgos Sakallieros, “Contextualizing Cultural Policies in 20th – and Early 21st – Century Greece: Readings in Political Milieu, Art Music and Popular Culture”, *Series Musicologica Balcanica*, 3, 2022, 146–47, <https://doi.org/10.26262/smb.v0i3.7977>, accessed 17 February 2025.

³⁶ Nick Poulakis, “European Art Music as a Modality of the Greek Crisis: Identities, Practices, and Discourses”, *Series Musicologica Balcanica*, 1, No. 1, 2020, 294–95. Accessed 7 March 2025, <https://ejournals.lib.auth.gr/smb/article/view/7761/7529>

ganized open rehearsals, outdoor concerts, as well as interactive and multimedia performances in public spaces in the center of Athens, Piraeus and Thessaloniki, all extensively advertised as outreach to the wider public. These successful activities led to the institution's second phase: the relocation of GNO to the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center in 2017, an architectural marvel of a private cultural organization complex (Image 4), whose completion embodied a collective symbolic step for Greek society towards the end of the economic crisis.

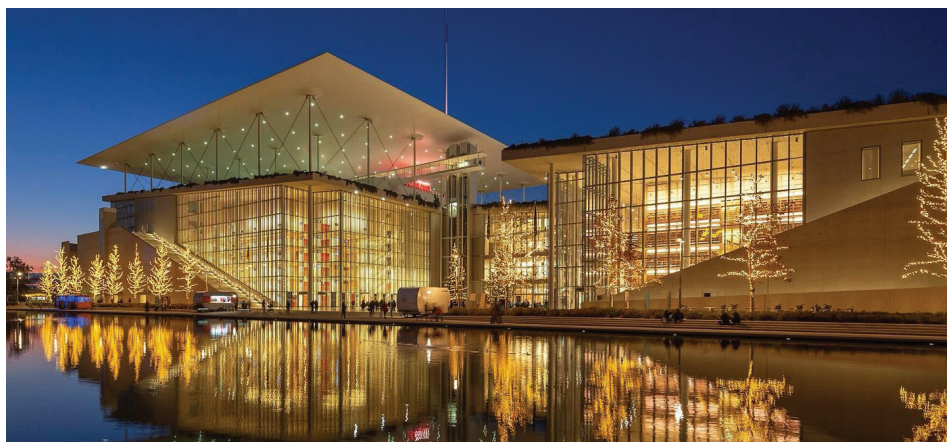


Image 4. An overview of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center in Athens, featuring the dual building complex of the Greek National Opera (on the left) and the National Library (on the right). Designed by architect Renzo Piano.³⁷

The case study of the Greek National Opera represents a twofold approach. While initially relying on a reduced public endowment after 2009, the institution focused on a transformation of the idea that the Greek public had about opera, from a “high-art” venue to a more popular-entertainment entity, by investing in “accessibility” to achieve profitability. The artistic compromises that contradicted the institution’s “high-art” legacy were initially promoted as “extroversion”. After 2017, this legacy was reinstated within the progressive 21st-century cultural policies that combined artistic and financial success at a new state-of-the-art private venue and under a new artistic director, the renowned composer Giorgos Koumendakis. The disengagement of cultural organizations from state financial dependence allowed private in-

³⁷ Image 4 source: <https://www.snfcc.org>

stitutions like the Onassis and Niarchos Foundations to implement their own individual cultural policies and emerge as regulators of the cultural milieu in Greece after 2010.³⁸

An addendum about the pandemic and repercussions on cultural politics may apply here. It was a shock to most audiences to see the abrupt shut-down of museums, galleries, theatres, libraries, and orchestras worldwide, in a scale unforeseeable and even wider than that of the darkest days of the Second World War. In recent papers the response of European governments regarding early measures and policies applying to culture has been analyzed in relation to state policies, public and private involvement in culture, the economic situation before the pandemic, and the importance of art and culture in society.³⁹ Justifications for state measures for the creative sectors have suggested a return to a “cultural” (more than a “creative” or profitable) frame of reference – at least in most European countries, not for example in the United States.

In Greece, the government faced accusations of being unresponsive to the arts sector and its representatives’ continuous appeals for support during the pandemic. Finally, on 11 August 2020 the Greek Ministry of Culture announced some relief measures. Despite acknowledging that the country’s cultural and creative sector was facing structural issues exacerbated by the pandemic, the ministry seemed to have comprehended such issues more as products of the economic crisis of 2009–2018. Relief support included (and I quote):

- [...] temporary economic support to wage earners, self-employed, individual businesses and certain professions affected by the pandemic,
- payment of repayable advances to companies with decreased turnover,
- payment of social security contributions for employees whose labor contracts have been suspended,
- deferral of taxes and social security contributions for at least three months for all companies, self-employed and wage earners affected by the COVID-19 pandemic,

³⁸ Sakallieros, “Contextualizing Cultural Policies in 20th – and Early 21st – Century Greece, 149.

³⁹ Diana Betzler et al., “COVID-19 and the Arts and Cultural Sectors: Investigating Countries’ Contextual Factors and Early Policy Measures”, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 27(6), 806–07. Accessed 12 January 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2020.1842383>

- an interest subsidy on loans to small and medium-sized enterprises,
- and higher health care expenditure.⁴⁰

According to information supplied by the Greek government approximately 40,000 people in the cultural and creative industries benefited from these horizontal measures. However, this statement was severely contradicted by workers in cultural production.

From what we have seen so far, the application of cultural policies in the field of music – be it an impact of political ideologies and historical events or a pursuit of patronage and economic support – incorporates a wide range of activities, from institutional practice to musical trends, and the role of musicians in relation to institutions. In recent years, Greek art-music historiography has significantly overcome the imposition of “borders” in its foundations regarding identities, traditions, styles, genres, and repertoires, and their resultant cultural, geographical, chronological or typological limitations and divisions. These parameters engender an abundance of historiographical interpretations but also unfold a common thread among the multifarious components of cultural contextualization in a manner allowing a broader, interdisciplinary, and more critical reading of post-1950 Greek music history and its actors – the ones who constitute it, communicate it, experience it, and who record and document it.

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⁴⁰ Sakallieros, “Contextualizing Cultural Policies in 20th – and Early 21st – Century Greece”, 150.

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Summary

In recent decades, the Greek musicological community has successfully highlighted diverse perspectives of Modern Greek musical life and creation through historical, analytical, interdisciplinary, inter-artistic, aesthetic, ideological, and critical approaches. However, despite these advancements, certain epistemological conventions continue to shape the discourse, sometimes reinforcing established boundaries rather than challenging them. Greek music historiography has traditionally been categorized, or even "bordered", by distinct geographical, chronological, and typological divisions, resulting in rigid classifications of local musical traditions, schools, styles, and repertoires. While these distinctions have provided structure, they have also imposed certain limitations on the way Greek music history is viewed and examined.

This paper aims at critically reassessing the historiographical canon of Greek music by focusing on the period from 1950 to 2020. Using a case study approach, the research highlights key transformations in Greek musical life and creation within the broader European context. A central theme of this analysis is the challenge of overcoming traditional dichotomies, e.g. between the cultural “center” and “periphery”, a recurring issue in music historiography, or between “high” and “low” perspectives of music creation. In addition to this broader framework, the study examines how Greece’s consecutive social, ideological, and cultural circumstances during the second half of the 20th century and the early 21st century have influenced musical trends. The impact of the political climate, economic conditions, and international relations – especially during the Cold War period and the later financial crisis of 2009–2018 – has played a crucial role in shaping Greece’s musical landscape. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has further disrupted cultural institutions and creative production, raising new questions about state intervention and cultural policy.

The present study also explores the role of domestic cultural policy in shaping Greek music institutions and artistic production. The influence of private and state-supported initiatives, as well as interactions with international cultural policies, has contributed to recent definitions of musical identity and artistic values in Greece. Key figures such as Manos Hadjidakis, Mikis Theodorakis, Iannis Xenakis, and Jani Christou have left a profound impact, reflecting both ideological and aesthetic shifts in Greek music. By engaging with these themes, this study promotes a more inclusive and critically engaged reading of Greek music historiography, one that recognizes the fluidity of cultural and artistic expression and reevaluates the contributions of individuals who have shaped it over the past seventy years.