

# *The Songs of Fire* (1975): Sonic Narratives of Resistance and Collective Memory

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the documentary *The Songs of Fire* by Nikos Koundouros (1975). Shot immediately after the fall of the military dictatorship (1967–74) in Greece, it exhumes the elation of three public concerts and demonstrations, capturing the enthusiasm for the return to democracy expressed through singing and chanting. The article focuses on the ways in which popular songs became the vehicles of the popular demand for democracy during the early transition to democracy. It shows how the film was crucial in establishing a narrative of resistance in collective memory that was centred on singing and listening, investigating the ways in which this sonic narrative, performed collectively and publicly, also betrays a latent reaction to a brutal regime fought by the few. It argues that collective singing seems to merge in memory with the ‘singing resistance’ performed individually and in secret during the dictatorship. Extended back in time, this sonic narrative registers an unconscious desire to repress the fact that large parts of society had remained silent during the regime’s seven-year rule.

Released in 1975 and directed by Nikos Koundouros, the documentary *Ta tragoudia tis fotias* (*The Songs of Fire*) is an audiovisual testament of the reclaiming of the right to full democratic political life after the fall of the military dictatorship that ruled Greece from April 1967 to July 1974.<sup>1</sup> The dictatorship’s fall was prompted by the Turkish invasion of Cyprus on 20 July 1974 in response to the regime’s failed *coup d’état* on 15 July against Cyprus’s elected president Archbishop Makarios III; the Turkish invasion led to the occupation of the northern part of the island that continues to this day.<sup>2</sup> Unable to deal with the political consequences of their coup, the dictators ceded power to politicians. This act brought to an end a brutal

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1 Nikos Koundouros, *Ta tragoudia tis fotias* (*The Songs of Fire*), YouTube, 1975, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8kiKAxBIF4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8kiKAxBIF4).

2 According to the Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus, its three protective powers (Greece, Turkey, and the UK) have the right to intervene (after consultation) in order to protect the Constitution. In this sense, the Turkish invasion was partly constitutional due to the coup; however, the island’s occupation is illegal and has been condemned internationally.

regime of terror that exercised systematic incarceration and torture of its political opponents. In other words, democracy did not come about through the victory of the resistance movement, but through a military defeat – a brief but intense conflict that turned thousands of Cypriots into refugees. Throughout the dictatorship there was resistance, but it did not mobilize as a mass movement until near the end of the regime; to a great extent the regime was unchallenged by the masses. The organized Left relentlessly defied the regime in different formations and organizations, despite the reign of terror and brutal torture. Acts of resistance also came from small groups within the military and the navy. Most importantly, the growing student movement represented the first mass expression of dissent, eventually prompting people to take to the streets during the Athens Polytechnic uprising in November 1973.<sup>3</sup> Its violent suppression on 17 November 1973 unleashed another wave of arrests and torture.<sup>4</sup> It also led to the overthrow of Colonel Georgios Papadopoulos's regime, which had offered a general amnesty to political prisoners in August 1973 and had already begun a process of so-called controlled 'liberalization'. The new regime leader, the hard-liner Dimitris Ioannidis, was the one to later implement the coup in Cyprus.

The fall of the regime in July 1974 marks the beginning of the period of *Metapolitefsi*, which essentially means transition to democracy. Nikos Koundouros's documentary *The Songs of Fire* records events in the first four months of this transition. Koundouros began filming upon his return to Greece from self-exile in Paris. His 'ode to freedom' aimed at depicting the voices and claims of the people as they were shaped in the streets of Athens at the time.<sup>5</sup> The film documented three popular music concerts that were registered in collective memory as important landmarks of this period, alongside political demonstrations against the regime, all depicting the enthusiasm for the return to democracy. This article explores how the film documents a 'shift in acoustic dynamics', to borrow Brandon LaBelle's term, that accompanied the reclaiming of full rights of political expression and participation.<sup>6</sup> I focus on the ways in which popular songs became vehicles for the expression of people's demand for democracy and justice, arguing that the association of popular songs with the struggle for democracy during this period had a twofold function. On the one hand, it was a shared experience that fostered the formation of a sonic community that overcame the boundaries of class, gender, and individual politics. On the other, the dynamic of this experience also reinforced a narrative of sonic resistance that was extended in time and was projected back into the years of the dictatorship. I argue that the performances and filmic

3 Important examples of mass anti-regime sentiment preceding the polytechnic uprising were the occupation of the Athens Law School (February–March 1973) and the funerals of former prime minister George Papandreu (3 November 1968) and poet George Seferis (22 September 1971). See Kostas Kornetis, *Children of the Dictatorship: Student Resistance, Cultural Politics and the 'Long 1960s' in Greece* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), 230–46 and 111–14.

4 On the polytechnic uprising and its generation, see Kornetis, *Children of the Dictatorship*.

5 Nikos Koundouros, 'O patriarchis tou ellinikou kinimatografou', *Cinephilia.gr*, [web.archive.org/web/20010710033921/http://www.cinephilia.gr/greek/koundour.htm](http://www.cinephilia.gr/web/20010710033921/http://www.cinephilia.gr/greek/koundour.htm).

6 LaBelle uses the term in a discussion about the protests in Lebanon in October 2019. See, Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Justice: Listening, Performativity and the Work of Reorientation* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 1.

documentation of these songs were instrumental in establishing a narrative of resistance centred on a collective memory of singing and listening to songs. The film proposes the singing subject as the political subject par excellence of the post-dictatorship period. In this sense, the sonic narrative of resistance, which was performed collectively and publicly in the early *Metapolitefsi*, tended to merge in memory with the ‘resistance’ that was performed individually and in secret during the dictatorship. This is made visible, I argue, in the way memory about this period has privileged the music of left-wing composer Mikis Theodorakis – the musical signifier of resistance and one of the most popular composers in Greece since the early 1960s. The merging of memories of these landmark concerts and of private listening, then, registers an unconscious desire to repress the fact that large parts of society had remained silent while the regime perpetrated torture and terror during the seven years of its rule.

### ***The Songs of Fire: a sonic archive of resistance***

In his autobiography, Nikos Koundouros writes that his documentary *The Songs of Fire* captured the passion of people for democracy: ‘in the streets and the large stadiums the songs of Theodorakis were heard, [people were] cheering for the new Democracy. People were demanding democracy and freedom, which they had been deprived of. Large stadiums were too small to contain people’s enthusiasm.’<sup>7</sup> For Koundouros, democracy is understood as the fomenting of participatory politics. What he calls the ‘beautiful image of a people in revolt’ was primarily expressed in singing and the chanting of political slogans on public occasions; it was a moment that needed to be captured. He thus invited seven Greek cinematographers to work with him on the filming, collaborating also with the Finos Film production company.<sup>8</sup> *The Songs of Fire* consists mainly of footage from three major popular music concerts that took place in Athens during the first months following the fall of the regime. The first, in September 1974, featured composer Yannis Markopoulos, singer-songwriters Manos Loizos and Mariza Koch, composer Stavros Xarhakos, actresses Melina Merkouri and Tzeni Karezi, and the actor Stavros Paravas, among others; Paravas was one of the last political prisoners to be released from the prison camp on the barren island of Giaros. The other two concerts were given by Mikis Theodorakis on 9 and 10 October 1974 in Athens; these were his first concerts in Greece since 1966. A former political prisoner, left-wing activist, and politician, Theodorakis was arrested by the regime in 1967. He was detained, incarcerated, and placed under house arrest and under internal banishment. He was eventually released in 1970, finding refuge in Paris where he lived as an exile until the regime’s fall. One of the first actions of the military regime was to ban the performance and transmission of his music ‘in any way or form’ through an army decree issued by Deputy General Odysseas

7 Nikos Koundouros, *Mnimi apitharchiti. Imerologio* (Athens: Agra, 2016), 166. My translation. On *The Songs of Fire* and cultural resistance, see Kostis Kornetis, ‘Cultural Resistances in Post-Authoritarian Greece: Protesting the Turkish Invasion of Cyprus in 1974’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 56/3 (2021), <https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/jcha/56/3>.

8 Nikos Koundouros, *Ta tragoudia tis fotias (The Songs of Fire)*, 1975, IMDb, [www.imdb.com/title/tt0289572/fullcredits/?ref\\_=tt\\_cl\\_sm](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0289572/fullcredits/?ref_=tt_cl_sm).

Angelis and the Army General Staff on 1 June 1967.<sup>9</sup> In protest, Paul Dessau composed the piece *Für Mikis Theodorakis – Armee Befehl Nr. 13 des Odysseus Aggelis, der sich General nennt* (*For Mikis Theodorakis – Army Decree No. 13 of Odysseus Angelis, Who Calls Himself General*, 1967) for narrator, mixed choir, and nine instruments, setting the decree's text to music. The ban made Theodorakis synonymous with resistance, a role he embraced through political songs composed in detention; many of these were smuggled abroad, making headlines in the foreign press and receiving international performances.<sup>10</sup> During his exile years in Paris, Theodorakis continued to write and perform political music in an attempt to internationalize the struggle against the regime, rallying support for those fighting in Greece.

The film is an audiovisual archive of the first months following the fall of the regime, documenting Greeks as they reclaimed their rights to expression and political life after a long period of silence. Footage from the concerts is montaged with shots from demonstrations that show people in the streets demanding justice. The film also bears witness to the political fragility of that period, since the dictators and the forces that supported them remained free and at large. Creating a dialogue of resistance between singing audiences in stadiums and demonstrators' chanting of political slogans in the streets of Athens, this montage constructs a striking sonic image of that moment in time, registering the break with the silence that marked the dictatorship years.<sup>11</sup> The film also inevitably privileges certain moments and events at the exclusion of others. Drawing on Dimitris Papanikolaou's discussion about the archive, such privileging produces memory and identity, creating the 'context through which we understand a period and its historical time'.<sup>12</sup> As I will argue, these aspects produce a sonic narrative of resistance that has shaped collective memory, leaving in the margins other, equally powerful and important events, notably the 1975 torturers' trials that were brought forward by lawsuits of the survivors themselves and not by the state.<sup>13</sup>

*The Songs of Fire* opens with a shot from a demonstration commemorating the polytechnic student uprising, accompanied by the voice of Maria Damanaki. The 'voice' of the

9 See Anonymous, 'Ta asmata tou M. Theodoraki apoteloun meson syndesmou metaxi ton komouniston. Apigorefti i metadosis ton', *Eleftheros Kosmos*, 2 June 1967, 2. As Penelope Petsini has shown, a second document was issued a year later, on 15 June 1968, rejecting a request to distinguish Theodorakis' political music from the rest of his work instead of banning his entire oeuvre. It noted that it would have been impossible to separate non-political from political works. Penelopi Petsini. 'Censorship Mechanism in the Dictatorship of the Colonels: Continuities and Discontinuities in Practices of Social Surveillance and Discipline'. Paper presented at the conference *International Conference Youth Resisting Dictatorship in Greece (1967–74) and Beyond: Social Sciences and Humanities Perspectives*, Rethymno, Greece, November 2021.

10 See, for instance, Cedrick Thornberry, 'Freedom Song from Gaol', *The Guardian*, 30 October 1967; Ron Hall, 'The Ballads of Averof Gaol', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 April 1968, 19.

11 See also Kornetis, 'Cultural Resistances', 647, 661.

12 Dimitris Papanikolaou, 'Eikosidio thesis gia tin anatarachi archiou', *Synchroni techniki ke archio: archiakes sylloges, kallitechnikes praktikes, provlmatismi – Kritiki ke techniki* (special issue) 6 (2016). For Papanikolaou's notion of archive trouble, see Dimitris Papanikolaou, 'Archive Trouble 2017', in *Culturescapes: Archeology of the Future*, ed. Kateryna Botanova, Christos Chrysopoulos, and Jurriaan Cooman (Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag, 2017).

13 See Pericles Rodakis, ed, *I dikes tis Chountas: i dikes ton vasaniston* (*The Trials of the Junta: The Trials of the Torturers*) 3 vols. (Athens: Democratic Times, 1976).

polytechnic's makeshift radio station, Damanaki is heard calling for continuous struggle for a free and independent Greece with sovereign citizens. A sonic signifier of the uprising, her voice directly alludes to the heroic resistance of students, the largest expression of mass resistance during the dictatorship. Shots from demonstrations that took place in the early transition period are interspersed throughout the film, showing people chanting such slogans as 'Bread, Freedom, Democracy' (one of the main slogans of the polytechnic uprising), 'People Remember November', 'Americans Out', 'Murderers', and 'Down with NATO'. The film also documents the funeral procession and burial of Cypriot poet and socialist politician Doros Loizou, assassinated on 30 August 1974 by the paramilitary Greek-Cypriot organization EOKA B, which had links to the dictatorship. Loizou was the secretary of the Cypriot socialist party EDEK and head of its youth section. His murder a month after the fall of the dictatorship in Greece showed how the dictators' proxies on the island were still in operation, underlining the fragility of the transition to democracy in both Greece and Cyprus. The loud chanting of political slogans is here replaced by the silence of banners with slogans against the CIA and NATO, among others. Two songs are heard towards the end of this sequence: the Greek national hymn (rather problematically also the anthem of the Republic of Cyprus<sup>14</sup>) and the traditional Cretan *rizitiko* song 'Πότε θα κόνει ξοστεριά' ('When Will the Sky Clear?'); the song formed part of the album *Rizitika* by Yannis Markopoulos released in 1971 (discussed further later). The scene ends with a brief statement by Loizou's widow, Barbara Bell Loizou: facing the camera, she says that she knows her husband's murderers.

Most importantly, the film bears witness to the testimony of torture survivor Christos Rekleitis. Rekleitis talks in detail about the brutal torture he endured: bastinado (foot whipping), electroshock of his genitals, stress positions, beatings with wires, nail and beard plucking, and mock burials, among others. As he narrates, members of the film crew use a human-size doll to demonstrate his torture descriptions. At the end, facing the camera, Rekleitis names his torturers one by one, sometimes pausing in silence. Koundouros interrupts the testimony by including the director's clapper that marks off the takes and punctuates the testimony. This technique, along with the recreation of torture with the dummy, serve as distancing and estrangement devices in the Brechtian sense (*Verfremdungseffekt*).<sup>15</sup> They prevent audiences from fully immersing themselves in the painful testimony, in keeping with Brecht's theory that immersion inevitably turns a work into a spectacle. On the contrary, through these interruptions Koundouros expected audiences to retain their role as critical observers to Rekleitis's testimony. In this sense, the criticism offered by the journal *Synchronos Kinimatografos* that the director's choice to collaborate with commercial production company Finos Film turned torture testimony into a 'commercialized spectacle' for the masses does not hold true.<sup>16</sup> Koundouros was well aware of the risks of representing trauma

14 See D. Dionysiou, 'Ethnikos Ymnos', *Polygnosi*, [www.polygnosi.com/cgi-bin/hweb?-A=42110&-V=limmata](http://www.polygnosi.com/cgi-bin/hweb?-A=42110&-V=limmata).

15 See, Bertolt Brecht, 'Small Organum for the Theatre' ('Kleines Organon für das Theater', 1949), in *Brecht on Theatre. The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. John Willett (London: Methuen Drama, 1964).

16 Kornetis, 'Cultural Resistances', 642–3.

and strategically introduced incisions and distance between the testimony and the spectator in an attempt to avoid sentimentalizing this scene.

Rekleitis's testimony, carefully placed towards the end of the documentary, is important as it emphatically introduces the colonels' regime of torture, and creates a counterpoint to the joyous singing crowds.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the film presents us with an oscillation between trauma and expressions of the desire for democracy, underscoring the fragility of the early transition to democracy. Indeed, Koundouros alludes to this fragility in the film more than once. In addition to the political assassination of Doros Loizou a month after the fall of the regime, the film also documents an attempt to sabotage Mikis Theodorakis's concert in October 1974 by cutting a cable of the sound equipment. As Maria Farantouri is singing, two shot-like sounds are heard. The camera captures the confusion on stage and Farantouri's worried face, while the audiences chant 'People remember November', referring to the polytechnic uprising. Eventually Mikis Theodorakis addresses the public and shows the cable, noting that it was deliberately cut by a knife. As a response, Theodorakis asks the audience to sing with him the song 'Ὀρωπός' ('Oropos') until the sound system is restored. Composed during his incarceration at Oropos prison in 1970, the song calls for people to remember fascism and the regime's places of terror, offering a clear riposte to his saboteurs.<sup>18</sup> In his autobiographical book *To chreos* (*The Duty*), Theodorakis notes that he was warned by Konstantinos Karamanlis's appointed interim government against taking this concert on tour, as he had originally planned.<sup>19</sup> Though he initially protested, in the end he complied and gave only two performances in Athens. The government feared incidents of provocation against Theodorakis and his musicians; that it felt unable to guarantee their protection underlines the political uncertainty of this period, which the film captures well.

### Folk music and protest songs

The concerts featured in *The Songs of Fire* are dominated by political, anti-fascist, and pro-democratic songs composed mostly during, but also before, the dictatorship. Though equally political, they are characterized by the different aesthetics of the musicians involved. In this section I focus primarily on Yannis Markopoulos, whose songs dominated the first concert, and which make distinctive reference to folk music. Markopoulos's engagement with folk music was part of a broader move by musicians during the dictatorship to reclaim folk traditions from the state's monopolization, creating for the public divergent narratives to the official ones. The colonels relied heavily on ideological rhetoric that stressed the nation's cultural continuity, from antiquity to Byzantium, Ottoman rule, and modern times. Folk music played a crucial role in this rhetoric: it was understood as the missing link that connected the

17 For reports on the regime's use of torture, see Amnesty International, *Situation in Greece* (London: Amnesty International, 1968); Amnesty International, *Torture in Greece: The First Torturers' Trial 1975* (London: Amnesty International, 1977); Nijboff Martinus, *Yearbook of the European Convention on Human Rights: The Greek Case (1969)* (Hague: European Commission of Human Rights, 1972).

18 'Oropos' was grouped together with three more songs under the title *Ta tragoudia tou stratopedou* (*Songs of the Barracks*, 1970). Mikis Theodorakis, *To chreos*, vol. 3 (Heraklion: Crete University Press, 2011), 1350–1.

19 Theodorakis, *To chreos*, 861–62.



Ottoman period with contemporary Greece.<sup>20</sup> It was therefore instrumentalized by the colonels as a means of legitimation. Paired with military marches, folk music became an integral part of the regime's cultural politics and the soundtrack of its early period. Special attention was given to the folk dance *tsamikos* and the so-called *kleftic* dances from mainland Greece, whose associations with the 1821 Revolution against the Ottomans placed them at the heart of the regime's national continuity discourse. Such was its association with the regime that *tsamiko* declined in popularity for decades later.<sup>21</sup>

Markopoulos framed his involvement with folk music as a 'back to the roots' movement, conceived not as a reactionary retreat but as an attempt to create an osmosis between musical pasts and the present.<sup>22</sup> His songs are subtle and nuanced, often presented as allegory and incorporating direct or indirect references to folk music through instrumentation, musical elements, or the choice of singers. Emblematic is the album *Rizitika* in 1971, performed by Cretan lyra player and singer Nikos Xylouris. Mainly originating from the Ottoman period in Crete, *rizitika* are folk songs associated with acts of resistance related to the many revolts on the island during that period. In this album Markopoulos combines traditional instruments such as the Cretan lyra, Pontian lyra, *santouri* (type of hammered dulcimer), *ascoman-tura* (type of bagpipe), lute, oud and *baglamas* (a type of long necked plucked lute) with the cello, double bass, and percussion, bringing together remarkably different musical traditions. Apart from reclaiming traditional music, Markopoulos's turn to folk music was also an ideal strategy for creating politically potent songs that would pass censorship. That *rizitika* songs were centuries old seems to have reassured the censors about any politically subversive content.<sup>23</sup>

Markopoulos's use of folk music in this particular album was criticized by Theodorakis in May 1974, a few months before the fall of the dictatorship. While praising Markopoulos's overall use of the timbre of traditional musical instruments, and noting how his works beautifully synthesize poetic text, melody, performers, and orchestration, he also regarded the songs on *Rizitika* as museum pieces, going as far as to call *Rizitika*'s success dangerous for encouraging a 'mentality of flight'.<sup>24</sup> Theodorakis understood his own music and songs as an aesthetic encounter of Byzantine, folk, and urban popular music (*laiko*). He sought to bring these elements together in a new genre called the art popular song (*entechno laiko*),

20 See Anna Papaeti, 'Folk Music and the Cultural Politics of the Military Junta in Greece (1967–1974)', *Mousikos Logos* 2 (2015), 51–3. On the ideological use of folk music in detention by regimes, in Greece see also Anna Papaeti, 'Music and Re-Education in Greek Prison Camps: From Makronisos (1947–1953) to Giaros (1967–1968)', *Torture: Journal on Rehabilitation of Torture Victims and Prevention of Torture* (special issue: *Music in Detention*) 23/2 (2013), 34–43.

21 Papaeti, 'Folk Music and the Cultural Politics of the Military Junta in Greece (1967–1974)'.

22 See Giorgos Amargianakis, 'Simioma', on Yannis Markopoulos, *Ithagenia*, CD, 1998. For Markopoulos's use of folk music, see also Alexandros Zotos, *Yannis Markopoulos: enas zontanos mythos tis synchronis Elladas*, trans. Eleni Tserzele (Athens: Kastaniotis, 2010), 61–5; Eleni Kallimopoulou, *Paradosiaká: Music, Meaning and Identity in Modern Greece* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 17–23.

23 Tasos Kritsiolis, 'Enas diskos irthe ap' ta palia! I diski pou den xechname. . .', *Music Corner* 6 October 2006, [www.musiccorner.gr/extras/record/014.html](http://www.musiccorner.gr/extras/record/014.html).

24 Mikis Theodorakis, 'O charactiras, ta provlimata ke i katastasi tis entechnis laikis mousikis simera' (May 1974), *To chreos*, 1278–79.

featuring *laiko*'s main instrument, the bouzouki;<sup>25</sup> like the colonels, his rather conservative view of Greek music also embraced the rhetoric of national cultural continuity, albeit from a different ideological perspective.<sup>26</sup> Yet Theodorakis's critique of Markopoulos is not convincing. Most of the songs on *Rizitika* were allegories of resistance and were perceived as such by contemporary audiences. Their proximity to folk songs must be understood within a strategy of resistance that enabled the songs to pass censorship. That they were later turned into symbols of struggle in different contexts demonstrated their contemporary relevance. A good example is the song 'When Will the Sky Clear?',<sup>27</sup> which was sung during the polytechnic uprising, the burial of Doros Loizos (documented in Koundouros's film), and is still sung to this day in political demonstrations in Greece.

Markopoulos's use of folk music is evident from the songs performed in *The Songs of Fire*. For instance, 'Μολοματένια λόγια' ('Golden Words'), whose text was written by Manos Eleftheriou, is an allegory about the struggles of the Left and the labour movement under the German Occupation, with references to places such as Kesariani and Kokkinia where the Nazis conducted mass executions of communists in 1944; in the case of the Kokkinia executions, the Nazis were aided by collaborators from the Greek Security Battalions.<sup>28</sup> Even though the dictatorship's spectre is implied but never explicitly confirmed, the song was censored by the regime and some of its lyrics had to be changed. Specifically, the word 'gang' was changed to 'group', because it was felt that 'gang' could refer to the colonels.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the word 'Friday' was changed to 'bad day', since Friday was the day of the colonels' coup:

Better you were called Maria  
and a seamstress in Kokkinia  
than to live with this group  
and not know the murderer's star  
...  
I was bound by straits and rules  
And at dawn on a bad day  
archer phalanxes and legions  
took me in a cage  
and in the basements the money changers  
throw dice for the centuries as a game.

25 See Theodorakis, *To chreos*, 1276–81; Mikis Theodorakis, *Gia tin elliniki mousiki* (Athens: Pleias, 1974).

26 A more radical invocation of and fragmentary approach to folk music is found in the work of singer and songwriter Dionysis Savvopoulos. See, Papanikolaou, *Singing Poets*, 133–45.

27 Yannis Markopoulos, 'Pote tha kanei xasteria?', *YouTube*, 1972, folk song, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzSjGLAVQpY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzSjGLAVQpY).

28 Yannis Markopoulos, 'Malamatenia logia', *YouTube*, 1974, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-s9dofQwRvM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-s9dofQwRvM).

29 I would like to thank Penelopi Petsini for generously providing me with material about the censorship of popular songs during the dictatorship, including this one. Giorgos Skintzas, 'Oi logokrites fevgoun, ta tragoudia menoun', *To Vima*, 17 April 2015, [www.tovima.gr/2015/04/17/culture/oi-logokrites-feygoyn-ta-tragoydia-menoyn/](http://www.tovima.gr/2015/04/17/culture/oi-logokrites-feygoyn-ta-tragoydia-menoyn/).



Folk music is invoked by the choice of the Cretan lyra player and singer Haralambos Garganourakis – performing with a heavy Cretan accent – and an orchestra including *santouri* and clarinet. At the same time, the use of brass (trumpet and tuba) at the beginning and a more persistent pulsing drum beat give the song a subtle militant touch that complements the textual references to the struggles of the Left in Greece. Indicative are the concluding lines noting that even in Hades (the underworld) they would be hounded, tried in hostile courts, tortured, and punished like criminals. Folk music is also alluded to through the distinctive voice of Cretan lyra player and singer Nikos Xylouris in the song ‘Μπήκαν στην πόλη οι οχτροί’ (‘The Enemies Have Entered the City’, 1972), which is based on an anti-war poem of Giorgos Skourtis.<sup>30</sup> The song relates the indifference, apathy, and even cheering of locals as enemy forces take over. The lyrics could be understood as referring to Greek people’s inaction in the face of the dictatorship, but its unspecified setting and the use of the word ‘polis’ could also be taken to refer to the fall of Constantinople (formerly Constantinopolis) in 1453 – the ultimate historic loss for Greek nationalists. These ambiguous aspects probably enabled the song to escape censorship. Indeed, Markopoulos’s political songs follow a strategy of either coding their meaning through references seemingly associated with previous historical times, or using a musical language – alluding to folk music – that was not associated with current political struggles and seemed benign.

The dialogue with folk music in this concert is further evident in the performance of the folk songs ‘Στο ’πα και στο ξαναλέω’ (‘I said it once and will said it again’) and ‘Αρμενάκι’ (Armenaki’) by singer-songwriter Mariza Koch.<sup>31</sup> Koch had also turned to folk music during the dictatorship, producing adaptations of folk songs that made notable use of electric sound. In an interview in August 2018, Koch noted that her use of electric instruments had the effect of transforming folk songs into protest songs, a reaction against the folk melodies heard on the radio that came to be heard as the musical equivalent of the regime’s speeches.<sup>32</sup> In another interview dated 10 January 2018, she also explained that her turn to electric sound for folk music adaptations aimed at avoiding the regime’s censorship.<sup>33</sup> Koch’s use of electric instruments and amplification added, in Dimitris Papanikolaou’s words, a ‘profoundly alienating effect to these well-known songs’.<sup>34</sup> Eleni Kallimopoulou and Kostis Kornetis have additionally argued that Koch’s performances of folk songs at small clubs and boîtes not only challenged the genre’s appropriation by the regime, but also created openings for progressive listeners.<sup>35</sup> In her performance of ‘Armenaki’ in *The Songs of Fire*, Koch substituted the word ‘island’ for ‘Cyprus’ (‘Take me to Cyprus’s port’),

30 Yannis Markopoulos, ‘Mpikan sti poli i ochtri’, *YouTube*, 1974, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=agoKJqhagCA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agoKJqhagCA).

31 Mariza Koch, ‘Armenaki’, *YouTube*, 1974, folk song, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tBheaWW45U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tBheaWW45U).

32 Mariza Koch cited in Eri Vardaki, ‘Mariza Koch. Tragoudisate proti fora sti zoi sas apo chara i apo lypi?’, *To Vima*, 6 August 2018, [www.tovima.gr/2018/08/06/vimagazino/mariza-kwx](http://www.tovima.gr/2018/08/06/vimagazino/mariza-kwx).

33 Alevra, Pepi, ‘I Mariza Koch stin E: o kosmos den ehei xechasi ti mousiki tou glossa’, *eleftheriaonline.gr*, 20 January 2018.

34 Papanikolaou, *Singing Poets*, 133–4. See also his discussion on mimicry and popular music, 110–13.

35 Eleni Kallimopoulou and Kostis Kornetis, ‘“Magical Liturgy”: A History of Sound at the Kytaro Music Club, 1970–1974’, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 35 (2017), 498.

a clear reference to the events unfolding in Cyprus.<sup>36</sup> This small textual substitution, along with the electric folk sound and the already charged political environment of the concert, turned the song into a political commentary about the catastrophic coup in Cyprus, the Turkish invasion, and its consequences. Koch's use of folk music was one of many dynamic approaches to reclaiming folk music from the acoustic clutches of the dictators, constituting not a quest for authenticity or a nostalgic retreat to the past, but rather an act of musical resistance.

Overall, Markopoulos's and Koch's songs re-imagined folk music in ways that undermined the master narrative that had dominated official cultural discourse during the dictatorship. The subtle yet powerful political character of these songs cannot be dissociated from the fact that Markopoulos and Koch lived in Greece during the regime. Wishing to remain musically and politically active, they were obliged to develop aesthetic strategies that could deliver political comment while escaping censorship. Previously heard predominantly in intimate spaces, this new approach finally registered itself vividly in an open public space at the 1974 concert, banishing the cacophonous pairing of folk music and marches blasted out from speakers at the regime's parades and large celebrations. Yet these songs not only aimed at freeing folk music from its Junta associations, but also constituted a musical and aesthetic appeal to the Greek people as a whole, bringing together the ideals of freedom and democracy under the all-encompassing features of a folk music reworked in order to provide spaces for resistance and political critique.

### Composing resistance: the case of Mikis Theodorakis

The selection of songs from Theodorakis's concerts in *The Songs of Fire* presents us with a different aesthetic. In contrast to the atemporal political settings of Markopoulos with their folk nuances, we are presented with a kind of *kampfmusik* in the Eislerian sense: songs composed for political struggle with militant undertones, using strong pulsating rhythms, drums, melodic simplicity, and repetition. Many of the songs were composed when Theodorakis was incarcerated, under house arrest, or under internal banishment, and later in self-exile in France. They primarily aimed at addressing the masses, sending a clear message both within Greece and abroad in order to mobilize support against the regime. In some cases, the songs directly referred to the atrocities of the regime. A good example is the song 'Το σφαγείο' ('The Slaughterhouse'), with which Koundouros introduces Theodorakis's concert in the film.<sup>37</sup> Written and composed by Theodorakis, it talks about the brutal torture suffered by Andreas Lentakis at the notorious headquarters of Athens Security Forces at Bouboulinas Street, where Theodorakis was also incarcerated. Lentakis, a friend of Theodorakis and member of the Lambrakis Democratic Youth,<sup>38</sup> had a cell adjacent to the composer's, and was tortured in a room immediately above. Theodorakis could hear his and other prisoners' screams, a traumatic listening experience that is central to the song. Apart from the horrors of torture,

<sup>36</sup> See also Kornetis, 'Cultural Resistances', 651.

<sup>37</sup> Mikis Theodorakis, 'To sfagio', 1974, *YouTube*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eInkacBLGHM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eInkacBLGHM).

<sup>38</sup> Theodorakis was the organization's first president.

the song also talks about the ways Theodorakis and Lentakis communicated through knocks on the wall ('tak tak'), a common practice between political prisoners through a kind of Morse code. 'The Slaughterhouse' is testimony to the nuanced dynamic of acousmatic sound in detention, from the terrifying sounds of torture to the soothing sounds of solidarity and camaraderie. The song itself is stripped to its bare essence: a strong, pulsating, regular rhythm, percussion, and an insistent melody based on repetition.

Other examples of political songs in the film include two works from Theodorakis's cycle *Ένας Όμηρος* (*A Hostage*), based on the play *An Giall* by the Irish playwright Brendan Behan about the Irish liberation struggle, composed and recorded before the dictatorship. One of the two songs, titled 'Το γελαστό παιδί' ('The Laughing Boy'), was inspired by Michael Collins, a leading figure in the IRA who was murdered during the Irish civil war. In the Greek context, the song was associated with the murder of left-wing politician Grigoris Lambrakis, assassinated by far-right thugs in 1963; Theodorakis had included the song in his soundtrack for Costa Gavras's film *Z* (1969). The second song 'Ποιός δεν μιλά για την Λαμπρή' ('Who Doesn't Talk about Easter') is a march that talks about the destruction of war and the killing of young people, women, and children, and the struggle's leaders.

The intensity and the militancy of Theodorakis's music, along with the reaction of the audience, created an electrifying atmosphere. This is unsurprising given Theodorakis's standing as perhaps the most famous popular music composer of the time in Greece, a status underlined by the regime's ban that had aligned him strongly with resistance. Koundouros manages to translate the intensity of the Theodorakis concert by increasingly including more shots of the audience singing and pulsating to the music. Setting the musicians and audience in counterpoint with one another, these shots serve to underline the identification of the audience with Theodorakis's music. His songs, with their march-like rhythms, catchy tunes, and openly political lyrics, and his singing style, with its tendency to break down phrases through vocal accentuation – almost ridding them of their melodic lyricism – dismantles the division between art and real life. Indicative is his reaction immediately after the equipment sabotage, when he invites people to sing along with him. In this way, the concert turns into a political participatory experience – a kind of rally – where the music unites musicians and spectators, even if only momentarily. In the words of Kostis Kornetis, the concerts portrayed in the film 'acted as a "loudspeaker" for people to vocalise these grievances'.<sup>39</sup> As Gail Holst has observed, after the fall of the dictatorship, Theodorakis approached his concerts as political gatherings, asking the police to stay outside the concert spaces; left in charge of maintaining order were young volunteers from left-wing organizations.<sup>40</sup> The film projects Theodorakis's music as a topos of resistance available to be claimed by different groups of people, a shared experience that was politically needed during the early, unstable transition period. It casts Theodorakis as the national composer he always aspired to be – a project he had already begun in the early 1960s. His music created a sense of unity after the painful years of the dictatorship.

39 Kornetis, 'Cultural Resistances', 654.

40 Gail Holst, *Mikis Theodorakis. Mythos ke politiki sti sychroni elliniki mousiki* (Athens: Metronomos, 2014), 204–5.

In ways such as these, the film portrays a 'shift in acoustic dynamics' that characterized the early transition to democracy. I draw here on the phrase used by Brandon LaBelle in his discussion of the October 2019 uprising in Lebanon. According to LaBelle, the uprising dismantled deeply embedded divisions within Lebanese society, projecting new articulations of community that 'have at their base a shift in acoustic and auditory norms'.<sup>41</sup> This was achieved in part through 'more "independent" media' that directly spoke to and aired the views of demonstrators, thus disturbing the control of public discourse by centralized media. Even if the outcome of this moment of direct democracy in Lebanon remained undecided, LaBelle's term is important and useful in capturing the role of acoustics in this radical shift in political life. *Songs of Fire* attests to such a shift by depicting a multitude of voices emerging openly in public after seven years of terror, suppression, and silence. Freezing this moment in time, the film constructs the image of the political subject as a singing one, and of singing as resistance. As such, I would argue that the documentary has played a central role in solidifying the dominant narrative of resistance through song that emerged in the aftermath of the dictatorship. Singing provided a means through which such values as freedom, democracy, and resistance could be subscribed to by these concert audiences. The allusions to folk traditions through the incorporation of instruments, singers, musical styles, and renditions of folk songs, as well as Theodorakis's political songs, helped to provide a common ground that was much needed during the early transition to democracy, representing universal values that were broad enough to encompass the audience's differences.

Yet what this narrative of national unity unconsciously represses is the fact that for seven years the regime was not challenged by a mass movement, in spite of (and perhaps partly because of) its brutal regime of terror. Indeed, the masses largely either complied with the regime – to different degrees – or did not openly challenge it. The acoustics of togetherness, resistance, and the victory of democracy evoked in the film, and in public memory ever since, must be listened to in conjunction with an awareness of the traumas that are being worked on or repressed through this shift in acoustic dynamics. To be fair to Koundouros, one cannot accuse him of ignoring this painful past. On the contrary, his film bears witness to the regime's terror through Barbara Bell Loizou's testimony about her husband's assassins, and Rekleitis's about his torturers. Koundouros's choice of footage creates an important record of both traumas and hopes, weaving the different voices and agencies at play during the early period of the transition to democracy. Yet even though this counterpoint between public empowerment and terror aims at creating incisions in the narrative, the film's compilation inevitably creates a seamless narrative of resistance: of those who resisted in the past (e.g., the torture survivor and artists such as Theodorakis), and those demanding democracy during the transition period (e.g., demonstrators, concert audiences).

This narrative of collective resistance has prevailed over other key moments during the transition to democracy that emphasized different, more troubling aspects of the past. The torturers' trials that took place in 1975 and were reported by the press on a daily basis were an event of enormous significance. Not only did they constitute the first torturers' trials

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41 LaBelle, *Acoustic Justice*, 2.

internationally since Nuremberg, but also provided important information about new forms of torture emerging in the Cold War period, as well as the training of torturers.<sup>42</sup> The difficulty of discussing the use of torture by the dictatorship persists to this day.<sup>43</sup> This gap in public memory is partly due to a repression mechanism initiated not just by the traumatic nature of torture, but also by the inactivity and silence of many at the time. In this sense, the public outbursts of joy and singing for democracy in the aftermath of the dictatorship betrayed a latent reaction to a brutal regime fought by the few. It is as if the destabilizing traumatic history made visible by the trials was repressed in collective memory by the discourse of personal resistance through song. Nikolas Papadogiannis notes how the depiction of ‘suffering and struggle’ in the concerts and the film not only served to evoke ‘the trope of universal popular resistance against the dictatorship’, but also additionally ‘galvanized militancy in the post-dictatorship years’;<sup>44</sup> arguably, though, *Songs of Fire* also served to project this element of popular militancy back in time. It is to this kind of overcompensation for people’s silence that Manolis Anagnostakis refers in his poem ‘I Am Afraid’. First published in the left-wing newspaper *Avgi*, ten days after the anniversary of the polytechnic uprising in 1983, it expresses scepticism at the public outbursts of joy that met the end of the regime, and makes specific reference to the role of song by naming Maria Farantouri, the voice of Theodorakis’s political songs during and right after the dictatorship:

I am afraid  
 Of the people who for seven years  
 Pretended that they hadn’t noticed  
 And one beautiful morning – in the middle of July  
 They went out in the squares holding little flags, shouting  
 ‘Give the junta to the people’.

...

I am afraid of the people

42 See, Amnesty International, *Torture in Greece*; Mika Haritos-Fatouros, *The Psychological Origins of Institutionalized Terror* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); Jørgen Flindt Pedersen and Erik Stephensen, *Your Neighbour’s Son. The Making of a Torturer*, YouTube, 1976, documentary film, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRLNRhJCN7Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRLNRhJCN7Y); Anna Papaeti, ‘Music, Torture, Testimony: Reopening the Case of the Greek Military Junta (1967–1974)’, *the world of music* (new series): *Music and Torture | Music and Punishment* 2:1 (2013), guest eds. Morag Josephine Grant and Anna Papaeti, 67–89.

43 This difficulty was evident in the negative reactions to the choice by the international visual arts exhibition documenta14 Kassel/Athens to revisit the issue of torture in Greece, Spain, and South America in its public programme, inaugurated in September 2016 with the 34 Exercises of Freedom (September 2016) to which I contributed (*documenta 14*, ‘Public Programs’, [www.documenta14.de/en/public-programs/](http://www.documenta14.de/en/public-programs/)). The hostile reflexes of journalists and public figures underline how the issue of the regime’s use of torture remains an unresolved trauma that has not been adequately dealt with by society.

44 Nikolas Papadogiannis, *Militant around the Clock? Left-Wing Youth Politics, Leisure, and Sexuality in Post-Dictatorship Greece, 1974–1981* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015), 87.

Who filled the tavernas  
and feasted at bouzouki clubs  
every night.  
And now they feast again  
passionately with [Maria] Farantouri.<sup>45</sup>

The privileging of the music of Theodorakis as a trope of resistance is another motif connecting the early transition period with the memory of the dictatorship years. During fieldwork I conducted in Greece on music during the dictatorship, whenever I asked about what music people sang or listened to, only one name was mentioned: Mikis Theodorakis. Political prisoners attested to singing Theodorakis in prison, some in secret and others loudly, noting how they were already imprisoned and could therefore suffer no further harm. My interviewees included activists, political prisoners and people actively associated with the resistance movements, but also a wide range of people who were not politically active or organized, spanning different backgrounds, gender, educational status, and political convictions. They too recalled listening to Theodorakis during the dictatorship. In most cases my interviewees used the first person plural ('we sang', 'we listened to'), implying a kind of collective experience that would not have been easy, given that Theodorakis's music was banned and its performance risked imprisonment. Even though my sample was limited, I think it is telling about the way the narrative of sonic resistance has been structured.

This recollection of sonic resistance calls for a symptomatic reading in the psychoanalytic sense, in order to understand how it conditions collective narratives of opposition, and privileges the music of Theodorakis in particular. That Theodorakis's music was listened to by many in secret is a fact. There are stories about elaborately hiding his records, listening to tapes that bore different titles, and hiding his songs in the middle of the tape with different music at the beginning. This secret listening is invoked in the comedy *Ο Θανάσις στη χώρα της σφαλιάρας* (*Thanasis in the Land of Slap*, 1976), starring comedian Thanasis Veggos. The film takes place during the Metaxas dictatorship (1936–41), with clear implied references to the colonels' regime.<sup>46</sup> When Veggos's car breaks down, it is towed by a lorry of a small-scale salesman who is, in fact, an opponent of the regime. When the driver is arrested by the security forces, Veggos – who is in his car at the back, unaware of what took place – enters the lorry. While driving to the next town, he plays a tape he finds there. To his surprise and excitement, he hears Theodorakis's banned political songs. He begins to sing, suddenly stops, looks around in fear, and closes the windows so that no one can hear him, unaware that the car's loudspeakers are playing at full volume. He finally enters a village where there is a regime celebration. The sound of the military band, celebratory speeches, and people cheering is juxtaposed with the loudspeakers playing Theodorakis music loudly, the ultimate listening fantasy of the dictatorship period.

45 Manolis Anagnostakis, 'Fovame' ('I Am Afraid'), *Avgi*, 27 November 1983. My translation.

46 *Thanasis sti chora tis sfaliaras* (*Thanasis in the Land of Slap*), YouTube, 1976, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=57Ub43WdoFU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57Ub43WdoFU).



I do not wish to question that Theodorakis's music was sung by many during the seven-year dictatorship; nor that it signified a shared experience and affinity. What I think calls for further analysis is the blanket, almost automatic statement by everyone I spoke to with regard to the repertory that they sang or listened to during this time – in other words, the privileging of Theodorakis's music in collective memory, despite the fact that this was a time of intense musical production in Greece and abroad, and that his music was banned. The repeated form of these testimonies builds a narrative of secret and unrelenting sonic resistance to the regime that structurally enables the overshadowing – if not the 'forgetting' – of the fact that for most of their rule the dictators were not challenged by the masses. As an act involving the body and physicality, singing is especially well suited to this invocation of resistance. Through the dynamic of this performative act, as well as the very intensity of the sonic experience, a narrative of resistance is presented through which the masses are unified sonically and musically not just in the present, but also in the past.

*The Songs of Fire* solidified this narrative by offering an audiovisual archive of the transition to democracy, in which popular songs, concerts, and political chanting in public demonstrations were cast as sonic acts of resistance that connected people across the political and social spectrum. As Dimitris Papanikolaou notes, the film 'performs a ritual of visual purification of the popular iconography of people (*laos*)', reversing the images of singing and cheering crowds in large public events organized by the regime.<sup>47</sup> The sonic memory of tumultuous historical events is shaped by factors that can give the act of listening or singing a longer duration or different volume. As witnesses to these changes in acoustic dynamics, our role is not that of an interrogator but of an attentive listener who tries to find out more about the listening, sonic, and musical experiences of such periods in time. Brandon LaBelle notes that the core of the auditory experience is the combination of intensity and ephemerality.<sup>48</sup> The intensity of the concerts in Koundouros's film, and particularly of Theodorakis's music and its effects on the audience, seems to freeze sound and time to a continuous act of singing, enabling the repression of the trauma of seven years of terror, violence, and silence. This is not a failure of *The Songs of Fire*. Its power is at the same time its weakness; both are part and parcel of the (inevitable) fate of a documentary/archive compiled right in the midst of an event of great scale and intensity. Even so, *The Songs of Fire* remains a powerful sonic testament to the shift in participatory politics, the reclaiming of free expression, and the emergence of open political life in Greece during the early transition to democracy.

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<sup>47</sup> Private conversation with Dimitris Papanikolaou.

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