

Famed Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis dies at 96

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Relatives and friends escort the coffin of Theodorakis outside of his home in Athens [Michalis Karagiannis/ Eurokinissi/AFP]

Athens, September 2 (RHC)-- Mikis Theodorakis, the beloved Greek composer whose spirited music and life of political defiance won international acclaim and inspired millions at home, has died. He was 96.

His death on Thursday at his home in central Athens was announced on state television and followed multiple hospitalizations in recent years, mostly for heart treatment.

Theodorakis's prolific career, which started at age 17, produced a hugely varied body of work that ranged from somber symphonies and an anthem for the Palestinian Liberation Organization to popular television and the film scores for, *Serpico*, and *Zorba the Greek*.

But the towering man with trademark worker suits, hoarse voice and wavy hair also is remembered by Greeks for his stubborn opposition to post-war regimes that persecuted him and outlawed his music.

The Greek flag was lowered to half-staff at the Acropolis as three days of national mourning were declared.

"He lived with passion, a life dedicated to music, the arts, our country and its people, dedicated to the ideas of freedom, justice, equality, social solidarity," Greek President Katerina Sakellariopoulou said in a statement.

"He wrote music that became intertwined with the historical and social developments in Greece in the post-war years, music that provided encouragement, consolation, protest, and support in the darker periods of our recent history."

Born on the eastern Aegean island of Chios on July 29, 1925, Theodorakis was exposed to music and politics from a young age. He began writing music and poetry in his teens, just as Greece entered World War II. During the war, he was arrested by the country's Italian and German occupiers for his involvement in left-wing resistance groups.

Some of those same groups bitterly opposed the government and monarchy that led immediately Greece after the war, leading to a 1946-49 civil war in which the communist-backed rebels eventually lost.

Theodorakis was jailed and sent to remote Greek islands, including the infamous "re-education" camp on the small island of Makronissos near Athens. As a result of severe beatings and torture, Theodorakis suffered broken limbs, respiratory problems and other injuries that plagued his health for the rest of his life. He suffered tuberculosis, was thrown into a psychiatric hospital, and was subjected to mock executions.

Despite the hardships, he managed to establish himself as a respected musician. He graduated from the Athens Music School in 1950 and continued his studies in Paris on a scholarship in 1954.

A prolific career as a composer began in earnest, as he worked in a huge range of genres from film scores and ballet music to operas, as well as chamber music, ancient Greek tragedies and Greek folk, setting the work of leading poets to music, including Spain's Federico Garcia Lorca and the Greek Nobel laureate Odysseas Elytis. A music series based on poems written by Nazi concentration camp survivor Iakovos Kambanellis, *The Ballad of Mauthausen*, described the horrors of camp life and the Holocaust.

But it was the Oscar-winning film adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis's, *Zorba the Greek*, in 1964, and the slow-to-frenetic title score by Theodorakis that made him a household name.

The movie starring Anthony Quinn, Alan Bates and Irene Pappas picked up three Academy Awards.

In 1969 he wrote the score for, *Z*, a film based on the assassination of Greek peace activist Grigoris Lambrakis which won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film that year.

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