

Informant Name	Gail Holst-Warhaft
Position	Professor of Comparative Literature
Institution	Cornell University
Biographical Notes	<p>[Yona Stamatis was born in New York City. She received her BA from the joint program between Barnard College (Columbia University) and Manhattan School of Music and an M.A. in Ethnomusicology from the University in Michigan. As a PhD candidate in Ethnomusicology at the University of Michigan, she recently completed one year of dissertation research in Athens with a focus on rebetika. She is currently writing her dissertation on the negotiation of Greek national identity through contemporary rebetika performance.]</p>
Interview Background	<p>I had the pleasure of interviewing Professor Gail-Holst Warhaft, distinguished scholar, poet, translator, musician, and biographer of Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis. This interview took place as part of preparation for my master's thesis entitled "Mikis Theodorakis's <i>Epitaphios</i>, and the Redefinition of Greek Folk Music", in which I analyzed Theodorakis's attempt in the late 1950s to create a popular art-song style that would serve as a "genuine folk music" for modern Greece. Gail Holst-Warhaft received her PhD in Comparative Literature from Cornell University in 1991. She is currently an Adjunct Associate Professor of Comparative Literature and serves as the Associate Director of the Institute for European Studies and as the Director of the Mediterranean Initiative at Cornell University. Major publications include "Road to Rembetika: Music of a Greek Sub-Culture" (1975), "Theodorakis; Myth and Politics in Modern Greek Music" (1980), and "The Cue for Passion: Grief and its Political Uses" (2000). She first became associated with Mikis Theodorakis, through her involvement with Greek/Australian anti-junta organizations. A collection of her latest translations of Theodorakis's poetry entitled "I Had Three Lives: Selected Poems of Theodorakis" (2004) has been published by Livanis Press. In her extensive collaboration with Mikis Theodorakis, Professor Holst-Warhaft has served as biographer, musician, political activist and translator, bringing his life and works to the English-speaking audience. Her ability to speak to the power of music to instigate social change coupled with her appreciation of "art for art's sake", were an inspiration.</p>
Date	02 November 2004
Transcript	<p>YONA STAMATIS: How did you become involved in music?</p> <p>GAIL HOLST-WARHAFT: Well, I started playing piano when I was very young. Then I had to give it up to go to university because in those days one couldn't do both. One couldn't continue both with academics and performance. So, I received my bachelor's degree in English Literature and the History of Art. After that I went to Greece and when I came back I took up the harpsichord. And I play the harpsichord today.</p> <p>YONA STAMATIS: And what was it that drew you to Greek music and Greek culture in general?</p> <p>GAIL HOLST-WARHAFT: I grew up in Australia and became involved with the Greek community there, first in Melbourne and then in Sydney. And then I spent some time in Greece but returned to Australia during the years of the military junta. I didn't want to be living there while those horrible things were being done to people like Theodorakis. He was being tortured in prisons and truly horrible things were happening. I didn't want to live there then.</p> <p>YONA STAMATIS: When and how did you first encounter Mikis Theodorakis?</p> <p>GAIL HOLST-WARHAFT: Well I met him at the Sydney airport. And I sort of became his interpreter in the clutch because I was the only person there that could do it. You know, he was a mythical figure. When he was released from prison he began touring the world trying to rally support for resistance against the dictatorship. On one of his trips he came to speak in Australia and I went to</p>

hear him speak. I was very involved in anti-dictatorship organizations in Australia... You know, for us it was truly the arrival of this mythical figure. So I served as his interpreter there. And then I returned to Greece and played in his orchestra. He would smuggle tapes out and we would listen to them. We would listen to these smuggled tapes and of course we would listen to his music. He was a really a mythical figure to us.

YONA STAMATIS: Why has the sentiment towards Theodorakis changed to such an extent? I know that between 1975 and 1976 there was a huge change in opinion for the worst towards him.

GAIL HOLST-WARHAFT: Yes, yes there was. It was Theodorakis's famous remark "Karamalis or the tanks" that caused the change, as this was taken as support of Karamanlis by the far left. Theodorakis was, indeed, in favor of a return to civilian government, even if it was led by the Right Wing party, whereas many on the left saw this as a sell-out. There was a particularly strong reaction to him by the Communist Youth movement (the KNites, as they were called). The fact that he had condemned the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia following the "Prague Spring" was also seen as a betrayal of the KKE. Then there was the fact that the youth of Greece had changed their tastes in music, becoming interested in Rock music and in the songs of Savvopoulos. Theodorakis's music didn't resonate with the young Greeks of the 70's.

YONA STAMATIS: You once compared Theodorakis's music to that of Bartok, Stravinsky, Britten, and Boulez. As such, why hasn't it made a greater impact outside of Greece and Greek communities? Or is that yet to come?

GAIL HOLST-WARHAFT: I don't know. I really don't know if people will come to recognize the greatness of his music. That is something I can't predict. People don't always recognize his classical compositions because he has become known as a composer of popular music. They think he couldn't possibly be so gifted in all those areas of composition. But he is truly gifted. And I made the connection between Bartok and Stravinsky and Theodorakis because though he did not know of those composers at the time he was writing, their compositions were really very similar. They were really doing the same things.

YONA STAMATIS: Do you think Theodorakis will be remembered for the myth, the politics or the music?

GAIL HOLST-WARHAFT: I think for his music. The people of the younger generation will remember his music. You know, the politics will die down. He has always taken very strong political stances... He has made some very strong statements lately... some of which we have been at odds about. I don't agree with some of the statements he has made about the Jews. Perhaps he's become a bit cantankerous in his older age. But he claims there has been a unified cause throughout. Many people don't see that.

YONA STAMATIS: Perhaps he just wants to get people riled up and thinking? Shocked into action?

GAIL HOLST-WARHAFT: Yes for sure. He is always making very strong political statements. I think he's a bit of an enfant terrible. As for the myth, that remains mostly for the older generation that lived through those tough political times. But for the younger generation I think they will remember his music-his popular music. People don't listen to his operas, only to his popular songs. And the Greeks are at the biggest fault for this. They only listen to his popular music. Not to his operas or ballets. But I think he will be remembered for his music.

YONA STAMATIS: I hope so.

GAIL HOLST-WARHAFT: Well, I hope so too.

YONA STAMATIS: I remember his 75th birthday celebration in New York at Avery Fisher Hall. The audience was mostly made up of members of the Greek Diaspora and they seemed to hold Theodorakis in great esteem. Do you think this is because he is a figure that satiates their nostalgia for their *patrida*?

GAIL HOLST-WARHAFT: Oh yes, absolutely... And I think his death will be one mourned the most by the Greeks more than any other figure of his generation. I can't think of any other figure who will be mourned in the same way. Not Savvopoulos. I think it will be a very unifying experience for the Greeks... There will also be a celebration for his 80th birthday on Crete. The island of Crete is a very special place for him. It is where his father is from and it is where he went to rest at various points throughout his life. I don't think he will attend because he has not been so well physically lately. His health is deteriorating a bit. But Crete is a very special place for him.

YONA STAMATIS: Speaking of Crete, why this fixation with the music from *Zorba the Greek*? I know that Theodorakis does not consider this to be his greatest work.

GAIL HOLST-WARHAFT: No, he doesn't consider it to be his greatest work at all. Perhaps the *Zorba* ballet but not the film-score. He is in fact quite annoyed by that. I've written an article on this - if you'd like I can send it to you... But I think it's the freedom of the Mediterranean--the escape from the modern world. There's a certain nostalgia for the return to the primitive and the freedom of the two men dancing on the beach.

YONA STAMATIS: And of course as Professor Artemis Leontis has written, Greeks have a tendency to exoticise themselves.

GAIL HOLST-WARHAFT: Yes exactly. That's a very big part of it.

YONA STAMATIS: Theodorakis once stated that one should place the piece of poetry in the foreground in order to understand his music. Yet he is also credited for having turned the poetry of Seferis and Ritsos into juke-box hits. Do you feel Theodorakis compromised either the poetry or the music in order to create this fusion?

GAIL HOLST-WARHAFT: No. Absolutely not. I think that if it makes good art it is worth it. I don't care much for the stuffy boundaries between poetry and music. You know, Theodorakis spread good music and poetry around Greece. He is a really really gifted musician. I think what he has done is ingenious. No one has combined poetry and music in the way that he has. Poetry and music are meant to go together. And they always have, especially in Greece. Composers have been setting poetry to music since Ancient times. And poets have been inspired by musical forms as well. It is in the history of Greece, the combination of poetry and music. They are not meant to be kept apart. And he did it better I think than anyone else.

YONA STAMATIS: Agreed. I remember Karen Van Dyck telling of her experience in a restaurant on Kalymnos. She said a very old and surely uneducated Greek man began to sing and she was shocked to recognize the poetry of Ritsos!

GAIL HOLST-WARHAFT: Oh yes. Well he brought the poetry to the people. I really don't agree with this strict division between genres of poetry and music. I think if it makes a beautiful art form... who cares about the boundaries. You know, in the end, if it's something that no one has done before and it is beautiful, then there is no reason it shouldn't be done... By the way, we are putting on a show tonight in New York, a show that we were actually thinking of bring to Michigan. We're only three performers: And we've got an excellent singer, Lilian Orfanos, with a wonderful voice. And a

really wonderful pianist. We are performing ten Theodorakis songs and I will read translations of the poetry in between the songs.

YONA STAMATIS: That sounds fantastic. I wish I could be there. Well, thank you so much for your time.

GAIL HOLST-WARHAFT: Not at all and do keep in touch. I will be very interested to see what turns out of your study. And I think Theodorakis will be as well.