

# The Vocal Works of Solon Michaelides

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## Introduction

Solon Michaelides was a great admirer and connoisseur of vocal music, and it comes as no surprise that his compositional output includes a considerable number of works for voice. He had a particular affection for choral music and he was continuously striving for a long-lasting interaction with choral groups and other stakeholders related to that repertory. As a matter of fact, one of Michaelides's great achievements was the foundation of what was probably the most important choral ensemble in Cyprus, the Aris Choir, which he conducted until his relocation to Greece in 1957. Furthermore, he often served as a jury member for choir competitions, including in international locations such as Wales, Italy, and Romania.

Solon Michaelides drew inspiration from a variety of sources:

1. Greek Mythology, ancient Greek literature, and ancient Greek philosophers;
2. the history and politics of Cyprus;
3. folk music;
4. Byzantine music; and
5. compositional styles from interwar France and Great Britain.

The lyrics he used come mostly from Greek poetry and literature, and in many occasions he turned to the works of such great poets as Costis Palamas, Dionisios Solomos, and Yiannis Ritsos. Another source of inspiration for him was Cyprus's struggle for independence from the British, as well as Greek Cypriots' distress following the Turkish invasion of 1974.

The present paper catalogues Michaelides's published vocal works, including sections of orchestral compositions that include vocal ensembles or soloists. It primarily draws upon information found in the Solon Michaelides Archive in Limassol. I also refer to scores acquired personally from Solon Michaelides himself, with whom I studied in Thessaloniki.

## Cantatas

Michaelides wrote three cantatas: *Ο Τάφος* [The Grave] (1936), *Ελεύθεροι Πολιορκημένοι* [The Free Besieged] (1955), and *Ύμνος και Θρήνος για την Κύπρο* [Hymn and Lament for Cyprus] (1975).

### ***Ο Τάφος* [The Grave], 1936, text by Kostis Palamas**

*The Grave* is a cantata for narrator, mezzo-soprano/dramatic soprano, bass/baritone, mixed choir, and orchestra. It is a setting of the poem by Costis Palamas, who wrote it after his child passed away.

I have always compared *The Grave* with Gustav Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*, a song cycle composed for the composer's two dead children. In both works, the music reflects ideas and emotions present in the text: agony, resurrection of the children, resignation, and endless love. How the music reflects these feelings however, differs in each case. Mahler composed these songs in his late romantic style between 1901 and 1904, while *The Grave* reveals the ingredients that would eventually form Michaelides's personal idiom.<sup>1</sup> Michaelides's cantata begins with an orchestral introduction before giving way at bar 22 to the narrator. Before long, the choir enters with a serene song followed by the entrances of the mezzo-soprano and the bass. The entire work is characterised by the dialogue between narrator, soloists and choir. Of special interest is the aria of the mezzo-soprano (the mother) at the beginning of the third part "Αφκιαστο και αστόλιστο" [Untidy and not made up], replete with pain and love for the dead child. The orchestration is unpretentious, characterized by the perpetual triplets on the strings and sextuplets on the harp (the strings and harp are the principal instruments used to accompany the cantata's arias). It has a considerable affect as it presents emotional intensity, which is emphasized by the gradually thickened texture and the dramatic overtones of the orchestra. The cantata's final section displays Michaelides's skill in polyphonic writing. The work drives to its conclusion with the words "Δραμάτων Δράματα" [Drama of all Dramas] presented by the full ensemble of orchestra, choir, and soloists.

### ***Ελεύθεροι Πολιορκημένοι* [The Free Besieged], 1955, text by Dionisios Solomos**

This is Michaelides's second cantata, completed in 1955, scored for soprano, baritone, and choir. Its text comes from Dionysios Solomos's poem "The Free Besieged," a masterpiece of Neo-Hellenic literature. Dedicated to the heroic struggle of the Mesolongi people in 1825–26, "The Free Besieged" refers to humanity's striving for morality and freedom. It was inspired by the revolution of Cypriots against the British rule (1955–59). The composer compares the bravery of the EOKA fighters with the heroes of Mesolongi.<sup>2</sup> The Cantata comprises two parts: Ο Πειρασμός [Temptation] and Η Σάλπιγγα [Trumpet].

### ***Ύμνος και Θρήνος για την Κύπρο* [Hymn and Lament for Cyprus], 1975, text by Yiannis Ritsos**

As its title says, Michaelides's third cantata is a hymn and lament inspired by the destruction caused by the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in July 1974. As the composer revealed in a television interview, he was searching for a text that would help him express his feelings after this tragedy, and he found it in Yiannis Ritsos' poem of 1975. The cantata is scored for baritone, mixed choir, and orchestra or piano. Its harmonic and melodic fabric verges towards simplicity, but the work is not lacking in emotional intensity. It expresses the enormous pain and devastation that was brought upon the people of Cyprus following the Turkish invasion. *Hymn and Lament for Cyprus* featured in the many charity concerts in Cyprus and Greece given by Solon Michaelides in his effort to help his suffering compatriots. It is notable that the baritone soloist and choir in those concerts were John Modinos and Aris Choir of Limassol, respectively.

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1 Michaelides' compositional approach is largely characterized by the integration of traditional and/or otherwise nationalistic elements, such as Byzantine melodic elements or Cypriot and Greek rhythms, along with techniques acquired via his French and British training. For more on his compositional style, see Vasilis Kallis, "Compositional Histories," in *Music in Cyprus*, ed. Jim Samson and Nikoletta Demetriou, 129–48 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

2 EOKA was the paramilitary organization that fought against British rule from 1955 to 1959.

## Songs

Despite their small number, Michaelides's songs for solo voice are quite representative of his style.

### ***La flûte [the Flute], 1934, text by André Chénier***

*La flûte* was composed in 1934 while Michaelides was studying in Paris. The song's text is by André Chénier, a French Romantic poet of Greek descent. The song represents the only occasion where Michaelides employed lyrics in a language other than Greek. It is written for soprano or tenor with piano accompaniment. Michaelides also prepared an arrangement for tenor, flute soloist, and string orchestra. *La flûte* is a very romantic song that exhibits influences from the French music of the interwar period. The text depicts someone remembering her childhood as her teacher delivers, with great patience, her first flute lesson.

The song was unknown until 2004, when I discovered it in the Lillian Voudouri Library in Athens. Its first performances took place in Nicosia and Vienna in that year as part of a project dedicated to the presentation of instrumental and vocal works by Michaelides and Christodoulos Georgiades, on the occasion of the accession of Cyprus to the European Union.

### ***Ta Μαύρα Μάτια [Dark Eyes], 1935, text by Demetris Libertis***

*Dark Eyes*, the first ever song to include a text by Cypriot folk poet Demetris Libertis, was originally written in the Cypriot dialect. Michaelides's later version, however, is a setting of an adaptation of the text into Modern Greek. Michaelides's version presents a different melody than the original but retains its folkloric character. The song is technically very demanding and its proper execution requires an experienced singer. Michaelides never included it in the repertory of his compositions that he asked me to perform, and I myself never heard it performed during my uncle's lifetime. Perhaps he did not consider it to be a successful composition. I only got hold of it years after his death from my voice teacher in Thessaloniki.

### ***Η Προσευχή του Ταπεινού [The Prayer of the Humble One], 1953, text by Zacharias Papantoniou***

*The Prayer of the Humble One*, for baritone or mezzo-soprano with piano accompaniment, is considered by many to be Michaelides's most important and representative song. Originally set by Michaelides in 1953, he also arranged a version for voice and orchestra seven years later. In the poem, the humble one neither complains, nor does he expect reward for his good deed. He merely offers thanks to God for having the privilege to enjoy creation. To sing this song, one must understand the meaning, the allegory, and the symbolism of the poetry. Its interpretation demands adequate musical knowledge, and considerable technical ability.

I would suggest that this song evokes Michaelides's own character: a noble personality, but at the same time unpretentious and very kind, who loved music, culture, and his fellow man. He often helped and supported his colleagues and students, not hesitating to put his own life in danger at times.

### ***Ta Μάτια σου [Your Eyes], 1965, text by Nikos Kranidiotis***

This is a lyrical love song with a beautiful melody and an accompaniment that fosters a romantic, passionate atmosphere. The poem is by Cypriot writer Nikos Kranidiotis. Although the composer scored the song for soprano, in my opinion a darker and lower voice can be more effective in bringing out its full emotional impact. While it poses no particular technical

difficulties, the song can be expressed better by a voice that possesses the skill of voice colorization.

### ***Κερόνια Μου* [My Kyrenia] ( Kypros Chrysanthis), 1976**

Completed in 1976, this song for soprano and piano shares its text with two other vocal compositions (presented below).

## **Other Vocal Compositions**

### ***Scene Dramatique* from *Ιφιγένια εν Ταύρις* [Iphigenia in Tauris], 1943, adapted from Euripides**

Scored for soprano and female choir, this work is a scene/aria extracted from Euripides's tragedy *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, became a priestess at the temple of Artemis in Tauris. There, she was forced to participate in the sacrifice of foreigners, especially Hellenes, who landed on King Thoas's shores, a duty that she could hardly bear. Michaelides's composition is Ifigenia's lament for her lost family and homeland.

### ***Κυπριακά Ελευθερία* [Cypriot Freedom], 1959**

In this symphonic poem Michaelides employs a choir in the last part of the work to present Byzantine Easter hymn, *Χριστός ανέστη* [Christ Has Risen] as a symbol of liberation from British rule.

### **Η Ρωμιούσση [Modern Greece, or the Greek Nation], 1975, text by Vassilis Michaelides**

The text of this work are the last four lines of the eighteenth verse of Vasilis Michaelides's *The 9<sup>th</sup> of July 1821*. Composed after the Turkish invasion of 1974, it expresses the composer's hope for a future restoration of peace and justice to Cyprus. Although the composition is modest in its technical ambitions, it is no less impressive than other works of the composer. The choral part begins in unison, symbolizing the voice of the folk, before turning into a four voice choral piece with contrapuntal writing.

### ***Κερόνια Μου* [My Kyrenia], 1979, text by Kypros Chrysanthis**

Completed in 1979, *My Kyrenia* is Michaelides's last composed work. It is scored for solo soprano, mixed choir, and piano. For this song Michaelides utilized a poem written by Kypros Chrysanthis. *My Kyrenia* is a lament for the loss of his mother's home city. The music reflects the sadness of the text, which speaks about how the peaceful and carefree life of the people of Kyrenia was devastated by the Turkish invasion of 1974 and the loss of their treasured town. The poet unveils his feelings of sadness but also of hope that one day he will return to his beloved homeland.

### **Οδυσσέας [Ulysses], Opera, 1950, revised 1972–3**

Michaelides's three-act opera *Ulysses*, adapted from Homer's epic, is his only contribution to the genre. With a Greek libretto of his own writing, Michaelides began composing the score in 1950,

which he over the course of 1972–3. Unfortunately, Michaelides only completed the Prelude, Prologue, and the first Act.

The characters and roles of the opera are:

- Ulysses – baritone
- Nausicaa – soprano
- Alkinoos – baritone
- Demodocus – tenor
- Kalypso – mezzo-soprano
- Penelope – soprano
- Telemachos – tenor

The following is an outline of the structure of the entire opera, indicating which parts of the score were completed, and when.

### **Prelude**

The piano score was completed and partly orchestrated.

### **Prologue (1950)**

The piano score for Act I is almost completed but not orchestrated. The following are named scenes within the prologue.

- *Στο Νησί της Ωγυγίας* [At the Island of Ogygia]
- *Αποχαιρετισμός* [Farewell], a very long dialogue between Calypso and Ulysses that ends in a duet.

### **Act I, scene 1**

Michaelides completed the orchestration of this scene. The following are named scenes within the act.

*Στο Νησί των Φαιάκων* [At the Island of the Phaeacians]

*Μπαλέτο Ναυσικάς – Θεραπεινίδων* [Ballet for Nausicaä and the Nymphs]

*Συνάντηση Ναυσικάς – Οδυσσέα* [Meeting between Nausicaä and Ulysses], a long scene that includes the arias for the two characters.

### **Act I, scene 2**

*Στο Παλάτι του Αλκίνοου* [At the Palace of Alkinous]

*Συμπόσιο*

Αλκίνοος – Ναυσικά [Alkinous – Nausicaä]. Nausicaa presents to Alkinous an unknown guest who just arrived to the island

Οδυσσέας – Ραψωδός [Ulysses–Minstrel]. Demodocus, the Minstrel, is singing about the adventures of Ulysses. After that, the guest presents himself as the person in the myth. He is still alive and on his way back home to Ithaka

Αρχόντοι [Archons]

This part includes the aria of Demodocus and the choral 'Χαίρε Οδυσσέα' ['Welcome Ulysses']

The Solon Michaelides Archive holds an additional file for the second Scene with additions and changes of harmonies.

## Act II

There are no records indicating that any portion of this act was ever composed.

## Act III[?]

Scene (Fiances), Penelope, Telemachos, and chorus.

*Χαιρετισμός του Οδυσσέα* [Welcoming Ulysses]. Chorus and soloists.

*Δόξα να 'χουν οι Θεοί* [Glory to the Gods]. Ensemble for Ulysses, Penelope, Telemachos, and chorus.

*Για την τρισάγια τούτη μέρα* [For this Special Holiday]. Ensemble for Ulysses, Penelope, Telemachos, and chorus.

## Performing Solon Michaelides Works

The proper interpretation of Solon Michaelides's works requires the singer's familiarity with the technical challenges present in performing modal music. Modal scales, which are the primary ingredient of Michaelides' compositional style, are often characterized by a feeling of uncertainty with regards to pitch centricity due to the absence of the familiar tonal centripetal harmonic progressions. Furthermore, there are occasions where the accompaniment provides sparse harmonic support to the melody, requiring the singer to rely more than usual on his or her ear. One has to approach the pieces as if they were atonal, and concentrate on the intervals and not the sense of the local key center. An additional difficulty of performing this music pertains to the pronunciation of the vowels *i* and *e* in the Greek language, which we find very often in the text. To make them sound warm, they need to be treated as open and round, especially at the higher vocal range. Several choral works as well as compositions that involve the orchestra incorporate smaller intervals and shorter durations (i.e., sixteenth or thirty-second notes), often within a chromatic and contrapuntally intense framework. Such passages may place additional stress on the singer, whose coordination with the orchestral ensemble is vital to harmonic transparency and the audience's correct perception of the music.

## Work Cited

Kallis, Vasilis. "Compositional Histories." In *Music in Cyprus*, ed. Jim Samson and Nikoletta Demetriou, 129–48. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015.

## Abstract

Solon Michaelides composed a considerable number of works for voice, including an unfinished opera (*Ulysses*), three cantatas, pieces for mixed choir, two symphonic poems with choir, scenes and chorals for Greek Tragedies, songs for solo voices, and operettas for school performances. In addition to drawing on Michaelides's deep knowledge of Ancient and Modern Greek literature, many of his vocal works were inspired by Cypriot nationalistic themes related the struggle for independence from Britain and the Turkish invasion of 1974. The article provides a comprehensive list of Michaelides's known vocal works and comments on the various technical and interpretive aspects of each.

## About the Author

Georgia Michaelides is a professor of singing technique and interpretation at the Institute of Antonio Salieri at the University of Music and Performing Art Vienna (Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien). She has also taught piano at the State Conservatory of Vienna. A

recipient of the Onassis Foundation scholarship for postgraduates, she pursued studies in voice technique, lied, oratorio and opera, and graduated from the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna with honours. Regularly performing as a soloist with orchestras in renowned music halls in Europe and singing in numerous solo and chamber music recitals, including with her Metamorfon ensemble, her activities also include recording for radio and television in Cyprus, Greece, Germany, and Austria. She serves on juries for international voice competitions and offers seminars and master classes on interpretation of opera, lied and oratorio for students and teachers in Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Thailand.