

## Tributes to Iannis Xenakis (29 May 1922–4 February 2001)

### Xenakis, by Richard Barrett

Iannis Xenakis was one of the very few composers of the twentieth century (and I suspect there will be fewer in the twenty-first) who at the same time rejected the fetishistic “masterpiece mentality”, which rightly belongs to an earlier time, and the pressure towards trivialization which continues its market-led (“post-modern”) hypertrophy. He also rejected: religion, empire building, other people’s idea of craftsmanship. Let’s bear these things in mind before letting any sentimental tendency to canonization get the better of us.

### Xenakis, by Richard Steinitz

Xenakis had one of the most extraordinary creative minds of the twentieth century. Utterly individual and unique, he was enormously admired by musicians, and exceptionally so by practitioners in other disciplines. For those privileged to know him, his unaffected courtesy and honesty inspired real affection, although it hardly disguised the austerity and stoicism he had acquired from a difficult and isolated early life.

His vast oeuvre spans almost half the century. After the unsympathetic reception of his early works, he grew to be performed and fêted all over the world. In later decades, his list of commissions ran years ahead. Yet he was always an outsider. He had entered new music not through Darmstadt and Cologne but via engineering and Le Corbusier’s architectural practice. His electronic music studio was not at IRCAM but in the National Telecommunications Center (CNET). Most “traditional” concert-goers never encountered his music, in the way that they might inadvertently find themselves hearing Boulez.

Even so, I was taken aback by the comment, printed in Xenakis’s obituary in *The Times* (2001), that his music only really became known in Britain from 1997. This entirely forgets the prominence given to Xenakis in the early 1970s by Lina Lalandi’s enterprising English Bach Festival (when, not a little bewildered, I first heard *Stratégie*, Xenakis’s “game for two orchestras and two conductors”), the London Music Digest in 1974, another London festival in 1982, an extensive celebration in Glasgow for his sixty-fifth birthday in 1987, plus many fine performances given by Spectrum and James Wood’s New London Chamber Choir. To the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival Xenakis came three times: in 1982, 1987, and 1997.

It was Xenakis's first visit to Huddersfield that I came to regard as the Festival's "coming of age," for it was only then I discovered the obvious: that to build a program around the presence of a personality so magnetic and original is a sure recipe for success. I hardly thought so in advance. Constrained by our tiny budget, I had devised a day entirely devoted to Xenakis: first, his existing chamber string music in a concert by the Arditti String Quartet; next, a discussion between Xenakis and Bernard Jacobsen; then (at Xenakis's suggestion), a concert of works for harpsichord, percussion, and tape. In marketing terms, for a Saturday evening this last looked like the kiss of death. In the event, a huge audience arrived as if from all over the country – from London, Newcastle, Birmingham, a contingent from South Wales. The brilliance with which Elizabeth Chojnacka and Sylvio Gualda accomplished dizzying heights of superhuman virtuosity was utterly electrifying. In the standing ovation that ended the day, somebody in the row behind remarked: "That was the most astonishing concert since I heard Klemperer conduct the 'Eroica' twenty years ago." It was an eccentric but telling comparison!

Alone with Xenakis in St Paul's Hall, he reached into his shoulder bag to extract some gifts: books in French and Italian on his music and architecture, the recent LP recording of *Cendrées*, and a gloriously illustrated volume on his "polytopes" depicting maquettes and drawings for the 1958 Philips Pavilion in Brussels, his sound and light installation at the 1967 World Expo in Montreal, others on the hills around Persepolis (1971) and – with lasers – in the cavernous Roman Baths of Cluny in Paris (1972). The design and computation of these polytopes followed principles which Xenakis had applied as much to the glissandi in *Metastaseis* as to his hyperbolic concrete paraboloids for the Philips Pavilion. Sadly, the world seems to have forgotten what a remarkable pioneer Xenakis was of daring multi-dimensional creations, before the far greater financial resources of the rock scene upstaged him. This much-treasured book Xenakis had inscribed, in thanks – as he put it – for my "wonderful action in favor of the music of today." It wasn't true. By then I had done little, and I felt touched by a gesture of generosity shown by only a few other great composers (Carter, Stockhausen, Ligeti are some). It inspired me to do more.

With Xenakis's sixty-fifth birthday approaching in 1987, I began to explore the possibility of bringing the UPIC computer to Britain, and called on the composer in Paris. The *Times* obituary suggests that his top-floor studio was something of a garret. In fact, with its shelves of books, scores, artifacts, atmosphere of comfortable concentration and bristling ideas, Xenakis's working papers bundled on his tall writing desk, and, on a low coffee-table, Hans-Otto Peitgen's recently published book *The Beauty of Fractals*, this intriguing loft, high above the streets of Pigalle, struck me both as a crucible of creativity and a spiritual sanctuary.

At that time, however, Xenakis was working most days at CEMAMu, his computer music research center at CNET. The following day, I visited him there and was ushered into the UPIC laboratory. Xenakis was standing at its large digitized drawing board, etching lines and shapes with an electromagnetic pen. No sooner drawn than heard. Some of these shapes looked like a cohort of seahorses, and sounded like a wild series of whoops. Their connective rationale was his belief in a universal theory of form. He was, in fact, composing *Taurhiphanie*, a tape work to be played outdoors the following summer in the Roman amphitheater in Arles, whilst white horses and black bulls from the

Camargue galloped round the arena, electronic sensors strapped to their horns (well, of course!), in order to trigger random sounds and lights.

After an hour or so, Xenakis had to leave, but I could stay if I wanted. Would I like to compose something myself? Sure, I would! Two hours later and immensely exhilarated, I emerged clutching my own UPIC print-outs as well as Xenakis's (I still have them), having created a minute or so of my own visual music, heard and judged it, achieved at speed by dint of drawing a basic image, copying, expanding, contracting, and squeezing until I had a miniature sequence that made sense.

This was, and is, the beauty of Xenakis's vision: a tool that anybody (professional or novice) can access. When, later that year, we brought the UPIC for a fortnight on its first visit to Britain, school groups from miles around flocked to the hands-on sessions in Huddersfield Art Gallery, some of the most heart-warming results produced in a morning or two by pupils with severe learning difficulties.

One went on performing Xenakis. One had to, just as one had to go to London, Glasgow, Bath, or wherever his music was being performed. A generation of young interpreters began to emerge, inspired by and dedicated to his music, and seemingly able to accomplish the impossible. One was the percussionist Roland Auzet, for whom, with a superb group of singers soon to be named *Les jeunes solistes*, Xenakis created a Faustian music drama, a compilation mainly of existing works. We gave its only UK performance in Huddersfield Town Hall in 1982, the tense drama of the music terrifyingly enhanced by trapeze artists from the Paris circus swinging unprotected between ropes suspended from the stucco ceiling above our heads. Vintage Xenakis, it was, of course, both music and spectacle.

After five more years, when Xenakis was seventy-five, I thought it time to invite him again, although Radu Stan, his friend and representative at Éditions Salabert, had told me he wasn't well. None the less, I was asked by his wife Françoise to join them and Radu for lunch in their Pigalle apartment. Xenakis was charming, articulate, and intelligent, but it was disturbingly evident that there were details he could not recall. Simply yet graciously welcomed, surrounded by elegantly beautiful works of art, timelessly old and new, like his music, I felt immensely privileged to be there, but also apprehensive. Over the summer the news was not good, and when, in response to a joint commission between the Festival and the London Sinfonietta, *O-Mega* arrived, a spare four minutes of minimal percussion music accompanied by ensemble, it was poignantly clear that Xenakis himself – discerning and truthful as always – knew this to be his last. It was hard to accept that this courageous intellect, this ferociously uncompromising yet humane spirit, was able to write no more.

Xenakis's calculated early music – that based on game theory, for instance – I still find difficult. Yet a certain playfulness is at the heart of all he did; it certainly inspired the polytopes, "play" and "constructivism" being, after all, not that far apart. Later, by his own admission, he composed more intuitively, and what one senses most of all in his mature compositions is his unique ability to harness some primeval and elemental power – volcanic, direct and searing – like the physical forces and ancient myths alluded to in their titles.

## Xenakis, by Richard Toop

At the end of a great career, it's natural to think above all of its many successes. But perhaps another mark of greatness is the capacity to survive adversity – not so much in the sense of the personal afflictions so gladly seized upon by novelists and film makers (and Xenakis's early life had no shortage of those), but above all in terms of the creative work itself. One tends to gloss over the three years of fairly dismal creations that separate Beethoven's middle and later periods, or the many years of apparently fruitless struggle that separated Schoenberg's Op. 22 songs from the first 12-tone works. Yet perhaps it is the persistence of an exceptional artist through seemingly bleak years that offers the most telling index of integrity.

With Xenakis, I think, that time came rather early in his career. The mixture of success and scandal surrounding *Metastaseis* and *Pithoprakta* was relatively short-lived. Then, from 1957 to about 1962, came a period of hard-line research whose outcomes attracted much less attention, and not without reason. Listening forty years later to the work from that period – pieces like *Achorripsis*, *Syrmos*, *Analogiques A + B*, or the *ST* series – it's frankly hard to get excited. Only *Diamorphoses* and *Herma* seem to step outside the prevailing sense of a theory-driven aridity that commands respect rather than enthusiasm. But, undoubtedly, this period of exploration was indispensable. One could compare it to the situation of a scientist who has some brilliant intuitions, publishes a couple of thought-provoking articles, but then has to retreat to the rigors of the laboratory for a few years to see what really works. For Xenakis, the preliminary findings are recorded in the first edition of *Musiques formelles*, and all the works it refers to are given roughly equal status. Yet for the listener back in those days, the stand-out post-*Pithoprakta* works were clearly *Herma*, *Eonta*, and *Nomos Alpha*, suggesting that Venn diagrams and Markov chains might be more promising avenues to explore than Poisson distributions (or was it just that these solo works forced interpreters to evolve new notions of virtuosity?). Couldn't Xenakis see this, we wondered? Or was it that considerations of public response were irrelevant to his systematic investigations?

If this was still an open question in 1965, it wasn't open for much longer. Shortly after, Xenakis produced *Terretektorh*, *Nuits*, and *Nomos Gamma*: compelling, convulsive music, which, far from evoking the laboratory, seemed to encapsulate and even shape the turbulent spirit of the times, as witnessed in Milan Kundera's eloquent tribute to Xenakis. From then on, there was no looking back (except to Greek antiquity). Yet without the preceding years of uncompromising asceticism, would there have been anything to look forward to?

