

A Composer Beyond Music

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Iannis Xenakis has passed away but his influence has already passed into the next millennium. Just as Picasso transformed art in the twentieth century and Le Corbusier stamped architecture, it was Xenakis who defined modern music and envisioned the entry of computers before any other composer.

I have written much on Xenakis (cf. Matossian 1981), delivered lectures, been to premieres with him, co-produced a TV documentary (Kidel 1991), and even now am updating my biography, so I would like to dwell on the man himself and what made him a turning point in my life. Too often I heard him criticized as a cerebral and technocratic composer, so I would like to bear witness to the most inspiring man I ever knew.

It amused him to introduce me as “his living biographer,” guffawing with delight at the response, “But she’s too young.” He had a wicked sense of humor.

Thanks to the force with which his music had flattened me in the Queen Elizabeth Hall as a young student hearing it for the first time, I grasped instantly that here was philosophy born as music. It was instinctive. An illumination. And just as instinctively, a year later Xenakis himself accepted me as his biographer. “But I’m not a musicologist,” I blurted. “I don’t need someone to count my notes. I’ve already done that. You are a philosopher. You speak Greek. You love my music.” For Xenakis it was that simple.

At Rue Victor Masse we talked and argued. He explained and never refused to answer a question – except when it was about his life. “*Cela n’a pas d’importance.*” For years my home rang with the voice of Xenakis on tape, his music on record, his scores with their tiny notes scattered everywhere.

I did not have to be convinced that mathematics and music were inseparable, that a vision of the universe had to evoke chaos as well as order, that you could design a beautiful building and an orchestral piece with the same laws. Of course he never used the word “beautiful,” only the word “interesting.” I observed the relentless search. His studio awash with science magazines, mathematics books, Plato and ancient Greek poetry. He never played music. He worked like a maniac and I did too, especially through the night once he went home. Xenakis never walked; he ran.

A savage pursuit of ideas. He was on fire. I might be singed too, but I would document the process. From this privileged position he had granted me in his own studio I felt I could not stand back and pretend detachment. I was writing while Xenakis was still active. Better to document the meltdown. He too had lived alongside Le Corbusier and had much to tell me about his methods.

I was appalled by the so-called young composers of his generation who ostracized him for not being a “musician.” For fifty years he pursued an idea without caring whether it was acceptable or not, whether his music was played or ignored. At a concert of *Bohor* he kept leaving his seat to turn up the volume until I had to sit with my fingers in my ears. Only the youngest bore it with him. He was like Bach himself, creating not just music but a new way of listening, thinking, perceiving the world of sound. This he did, guided only by his own sure instinct based on his Greek culture, the monodic encounters of Byzantine psalmody, a de-cultured instrumental sound, a deconstructed orchestra.

At the end of his life the honors began to rain down upon him, but he was unimpressed. A few drops earlier would have meant so much more. For me, as for succeeding generations I suspect, he had become a lodestone for truth by sheer example. His judgements cut through cant, mannerisms, arrogance.

Still, the French establishment flayed him, and his great architectural projects gathered dust as mere models. Enduring years of political exile as a result of a military death sentence, he returned at last to his beloved Athens where he longed to build a great project, perhaps an opera house, but the offer never came. Xenakis, used to a difficult childhood, a traumatic youth in which he had almost lost his life, was able to battle on, with the spirited and steadfast belief of his wife Françoise and just a few visionary friends.

For a remote and awkward man he was a strange case. Every time we spoke he not only asked how I was, but how I felt. He listened not just to the words but the voice. There were comfortable silences, and somewhere he slipped in the question, “*Eisai eutixeis?*” (Are you happy?). At the end, even when he was ill, he always expressed his feelings of affection. If this is the portrait of a cold man then may we have more like Xenakis to melt the icecaps.

At his funeral in Père Lachaise Cemetery on 8 February 2001, I listened to *Nuits* seated before a life-sized picture of him, surrounded by his family and friends, and it struck me with overwhelming clarity, now he was gone, that it was not the theories and mathematical systems, so confusing and mesmerizing to his followers and enemies, that described or expressed his music. Xenakis, whose life was almost destroyed more than once, had embarked on a colossal intellectual odyssey leaving, at each port of call, a family of works based on a sense of deep-rootedness, soaring with free-wheeling fantasy and raw with emotion. His complete oeuvre, taken in its totality, reveals a most fearless and naked self-portrait. All the terrors and ecstasies lived but never uttered, every crag and chasm of his towering and magnificent personality, were delivered by his own formidable methodology. At the end, like a mythic Greek hero, he became most essentially himself. Indistinguishable from his music; Xenakis was the idea.

Yes, every discussion, every conversation, ended with the words, “But you see, Nour, the most important thing in art, and in life, is to be free.” I hope, gentle Iannis, you have found freedom at last.

References

- Kidel, Marc (dir.) (1991) *Something Rich and Strange*. BBC.
 Matossian, N. (1981) *Xenakis*. Paris: Fayard. First published in English in 1986 (London: Kahn & Averill; New York: Taplinger); paperback editions published in 1990 (London: Kahn & Averill), and 1991 (New York: Pro/Am Music Resources).

