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Evryali and the Exploding of the Interface: from Virtuosity to Anti-virtuosity and Beyond

Marc Couroux

Evryali (1973) by Iannis Xenakis represents a major turning point in composer-performer relations, when the well-oiled (and hardened) paradigms of Western Classical piano performance practice finally fell apart, replaced by provisional and open-ended values. The study of this work provided an impetus to search out other composers testing the notion of a "critical virtuosity" in their music, deliberately writing against conventional physical paradigms in order to trigger new relationships between body and matter. In effect, the old conceit of projecting a traditionally confident, totalized vision is no longer in the foreground. The author concludes by confronting *Evryali* head-on and provides personal, and ultimately provisional, performance solutions.

KEYWORDS: critical, virtuosity, body, interface, ritual, provisional, inefficiency

I. Introduction

In my formative years, I deliberately avoided studying the performances of classical pianists because of a general mistrust of an "oral tradition" light-years removed from the inflexible sanctity of the written score. Attempting to reinvent the music directly from musical notation leads one into areas of interface, which might otherwise have been glossed over or simply rejected in an attempt to insert oneself as surreptitiously as possible into the classical performative canon. The whole notion of "what sounds good," merely a collection of culturally received attitudes, always seemed to me pregnant for questioning. Moreover, much of what the performance of classical music has meant for the past 150 years or so has been inextricably fueled by the Olympian ego present in every performer, a ritual based in outward "demonstrations," a self-definition always attained by an external affirmation of ability: the performer-as-hero.

There was a time when these central questions became utterly pertinent, in the midst of learning *Evryali* by Iannis Xenakis. I wasn't quite ready to take it on when I did (as I believe no one can truly ever be), but the ensuing months of work revealed so much to me about the critical interface between performer and instrument that I was forced into a serious reconsideration of my social function as artist.

It seems to me that the nineteenth-century-based attitude of presenting the "perfect performer" as a transcendental demi-god still persists in concert halls across Europe and North America. The ritual of interface between performer and instrument but also, by extension, that between performer and audience, has

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long been unrenewed, summarized into bland versions of past practices. (One should remember that this current concert ritual has only been in place for roughly 150 years, ever since Franz Liszt began performing other composers' music as well as his own. The composer-performer as "total musician" soon became a rarity.)

Nowadays, in the serious-music world, there is an exaggerated emphasis on the flash of virtuosity, though it curiously backfired in the case of the notorious David Helfgott, whose virtuosity, as exemplified in the movie *Shine*, was later (and quite interestingly) dismantled through his idiosyncratic public performances. Nevertheless, this demonstrative patina of proficiency always seems to lurk near the surface in equal measure in commercially produced work as well as recent "art" music.

Prior to *Evryali* (1973), despite the growing difficulty of piano literature (due to significant advances in "performative-science," i.e. more efficiently trained performers), it was nevertheless possible for any *trained* virtuoso to attain an optimal physical realization of any work (without speaking of musical values). This heretofore certain goal was unceremoniously eradicated with the advent of *Evryali*, which contains passages that can never and will never be realized perfectly by any human performer.

Evryali was a major turning point, the precise moment when the well-oiled (and hardened) paradigms of piano performance practice finally fell apart, replaced by provisional and open-ended values (cf. Couroux 1994). Earlier on, in *Synaphaï* (1969), a piano concerto in which the solo part is notated on an average of six staves (to a maximum of 10: 1 for each finger), the pianist's hand–eye coordination had to be radically redefined, amounting to nothing less than the electrification of each finger as a potentially independent entity, capable of directing its own outcome (figure 1).

II. A Brief Anti-history of Anti-virtuosity

Following the experience of *Evryali*, I began to actively search out composers testing the notion of a "critical virtuosity" in their music, deliberately writing against conventional physical paradigms in order to trigger new relationships between body and matter. I was to find strikingly few examples.

Brian Ferneyhough describes his approach to instrumental writing in no uncertain terms: "most of the textures in my works are to a large degree relatable to gestural conventions already familiar from other contexts. What is unfamiliar is . . . the unusual rapidity with which these elements unfold and succeed one another" (Ferneyhough 1997a: 372). In his case, the compositional focus steadfastly remains on the material, exploded into a "welter of surface detail," but which still nevertheless taps into the classical performer's reservoir of learned physical gestures, "using techniques of gestural definition generally accepted as being pianistic in one sense or another" (Toop 1990: 57). Ferneyhough's retreat into this conventional paradigm is rather surprising considering his revolutionary stance in the 1970s, when the volatile relationship between body and sound seemed to usher in a new era of "performative science," albeit of a highly experimental nature.

A work like Claude Vivier's *Shiraz* (1977) pushes the performer's upper limit of virtuosity though everything in it is perfectly playable (being a very tight,

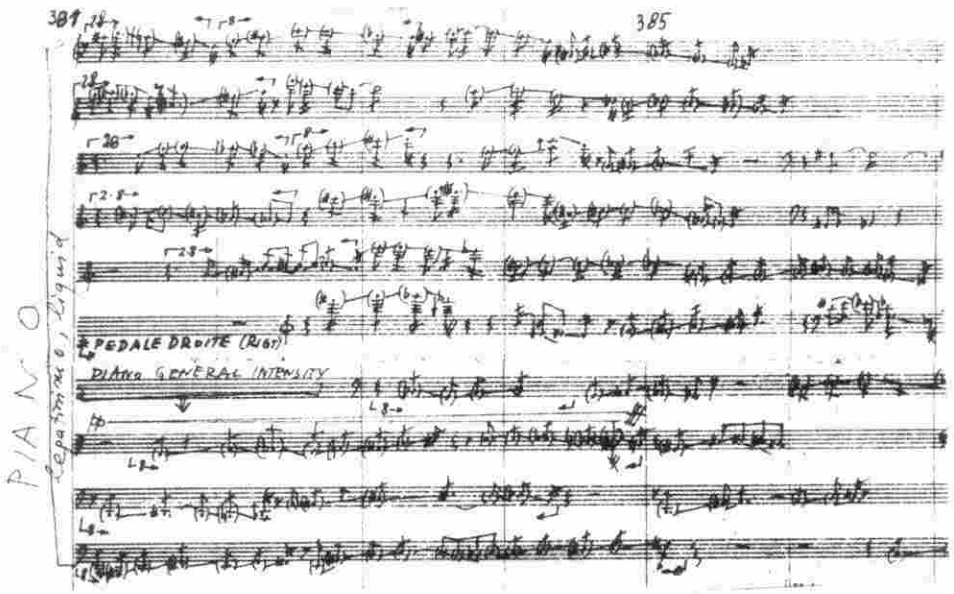

Figure 1
***Synaphaï*, piano part, mm. 381–386.**

eminently perceivable, four-part counterpoint), even if accuracy is hard to come by at the prescribed tempo. Similarly, James Harley's *flung loose into the stars* (1995) begins with a sparse, eight-part counterpoint which is gradually accelerated to almost impossible proportions, dragging the performer along with it as if in an irrepressible vortex. The final goal is clear because it has its roots in playability. It is easier to leap from a stable premise than to invent one out of thin air.

The prevailing Olympian attitude exploits a very one-sided view of human capacities: faster, louder, denser. My own *American Dreaming* (1999) and *le contrepoint académique (sic)* (2000) use the idea of anti-virtuosity as their initial premise and central argument – failure, a cul-de-sac from which it is indeed possible to "go on" and build a whole new set of instrument-performer relations (cf. Couroux 1999, Couroux 2000). We live with the antiquated notion that the performer is a totalized whole who must project confidently the music played in order for the message to come across. What might conceivably happen if the performer is deliberately inefficient? What would be the sonic result of such explorations?

Moreover, it has seemed to me that the one central issue preventing a more widespread communication between performer and listener (the key crisis of contemporary music this past century), has been the refusal on the performer's part to let the performative persona disintegrate on stage, fall away. Why couldn't the performer's entire nervous system be put *on the line* in front of everyone? (The example of Helfgott is unwittingly appropriate: the audience at times seems more interested in the possibility of collapse rather than success.) Wouldn't that be a more "human" form of communication? But would that be art? Wouldn't it remove the composer from his or her creative monopoly and

position of authority over everyone else (especially the performer)? I think we have a lot of trouble with this idea – we never hesitate in qualifying music as radical or avant-garde but we almost always fail to question the structures in which this music is presented. I think this is the one crucial leap that both composer and performer have to make in order to step out of the nineteenth century at last. (The separation of composer and performer as two distinct professions has effectively reinforced the status quo: the performer, removed from a creative position, seeks to nevertheless demonstrate virtuosity, heroism, and superiority to the audience; the composer, increasingly sheltered and disconnected from the necessity of ritual making, becomes overly concerned with purely musical content, to the detriment of context and surrounding ritual.)

Glenn Gould abandoned the concert stage in 1964, stating that there was no need "to climb Everest just because it is there. . . . It makes no sense to do things that are difficult just to prove they can be done" (Gould 1990: 452), sensing the aforementioned "performer-as-hero" syndrome as no longer necessary or indeed relevant. Gould's solution was Draconian: end the concert altogether and replace it with the increasingly capable medium of recording. Gould replaced the concert ritual with an entirely personal ritual, occurring between the listener and the recording, contemplated in one's own private environment. For him, technology "has the capability of replacing those awful and degrading and humanly damaging uncertainties which the concert brings with it; it takes the specific personal performance information out of the musical experience" (Gould 1990: 452). Gould keenly sensed the intense dislocation between the prevalent concert ritual and modern technological reality, but his solution nevertheless (and unfortunately) rules out even the remotest possibility of creating a new performance ritual which would reengage the lost listener on a level in step (or consciously out of step) with modern society.

The paradigm shift ushered in by *Evryali* was taken up only a few years later in Ferneyhough's *Time and Motion Study II* (1973–1976), literally a study of performance efficiency, wherein the electronics gradually subvert the cellist, forcing the player into a tight corner from which an exploded "drama" can take place, occurring within the confines of the performer-instrument conflict rather than situated in any extra-musical project (cf. Ferneyhough 1997b).

This train of thought has been pursued more recently by British composer Richard Barrett, albeit in quite a different manner. In a work such as *Tract* (1988–1996), for solo piano, 200 years of Western classical performance practice suddenly collapse; only shards of a past relationship are brought back for iconic value. The conceit of projecting a traditionally confident, totalized vision is no longer in the foreground. Rather, in the way Barrett lays out physical conundrums, very transparently, an X-ray of the performer's own physical relationship with his or her instrument begins to emerge. No longer are performer and instrument perceived as one single entity, merged in a state of complete identification, but two separate entities. The "drama" is now played out in the existential conflict between performer and instrument, which might eventually lead to a new paradigm of audience–performer interaction. The audience is much more actively participating in the deconstruction of the performative self through a transparent dissection of the performer–instrument relationship. Not surprisingly, Barrett has been criticized as "oppressive" for daring to question this last sacrosanct area of the classical performance tradition.

Gould would most certainly have appreciated the dissective qualities of Barrett's work (being a fanatical dissector of his own performances), but not the degree to which the performer is consequently stripped of self-assurance in the process! A new identification is created between the listener and this tangibly frail, no longer over-confident person on stage, undergoing a process of self-actualization via the medium of the concert. Much more than a simply voyeuristic, titillating relationship, the audience member is asked to question his or her active role in the social fabric of the concert.

In *Evryali*, the notion of "failure" doesn't come into play in as much as the performer is always required to engage the larger sonic picture adequately enough so as to give the "impression" that everything in the score is being played. *Evryali* becomes a largely personal conflict, a struggle with oneself to project a successful image to an audience (the Olympian bravura is still omnipresent), despite the overwhelming odds. But the roots of a new performative paradigm lie there, in "the sea at large," one of the most fruitful areas to explore in instrumental music, though largely unexplored since (with Barrett as a notable exception).

Evryali is not virtuosic, nor is it anti-virtuosic. It is highly unlikely that this state could have come about as a result of the composer's insufficient command of pianistic technique. The gauntlet is so clearly thrown down that the difficulties cannot be anything other than premeditated. *Evryali* deliberately oversteps the body, transgresses it, by projecting an austere "outside-time" phenomenon into the abyss between performer and instrument, revealing an endless stream of possibilities of action between these two solitudes. (Figures 2 and 3, Xenakis' arborescent graph and its musical realization, show how *Evryali*'s roots lie outside traditional conceptions of instrument–performer dynamics: when faithfully translated, the graph leads to eventual performative impossibilities.) A courageous and deliberate act of faith is required from the performer; the composer sets this in motion and can only hope that the performer will use it to transcend the body (and one's self-imposed, often unconscious, set of limitations) and to open up new realms of perception and physicality.

III. Slaying the Gorgon

A mini-controversy erupted in 1975 in the pages of *Tempo*, the London-based new music periodical. British pianist Peter Hill wrote a small but explosive article on performative solutions to *Evryali*. This kind of writing about pragmatic issues was still in its infancy when pianists Yuji Takahashi and Stephen Pruslin responded to Hill's solutions in the next issue, demeaning him for his seeming "cop-out" solutions. Hill responded to these accusations, counter-alleging that Takahashi was out of touch with reality. This controversy opens the floodgates for what follows.

IV. "Piano Reduction" (Hill)

Hill proposed that certain sections of *Evryali* be reduced onto two staves to facilitate learning (Hill 1975). This amounts to making (as strange as it sounds) a piano reduction of a piano piece (figure 4)! It is a seductive idea, one that I attempted myself in the early stages of learning, for it clearly shows what can and

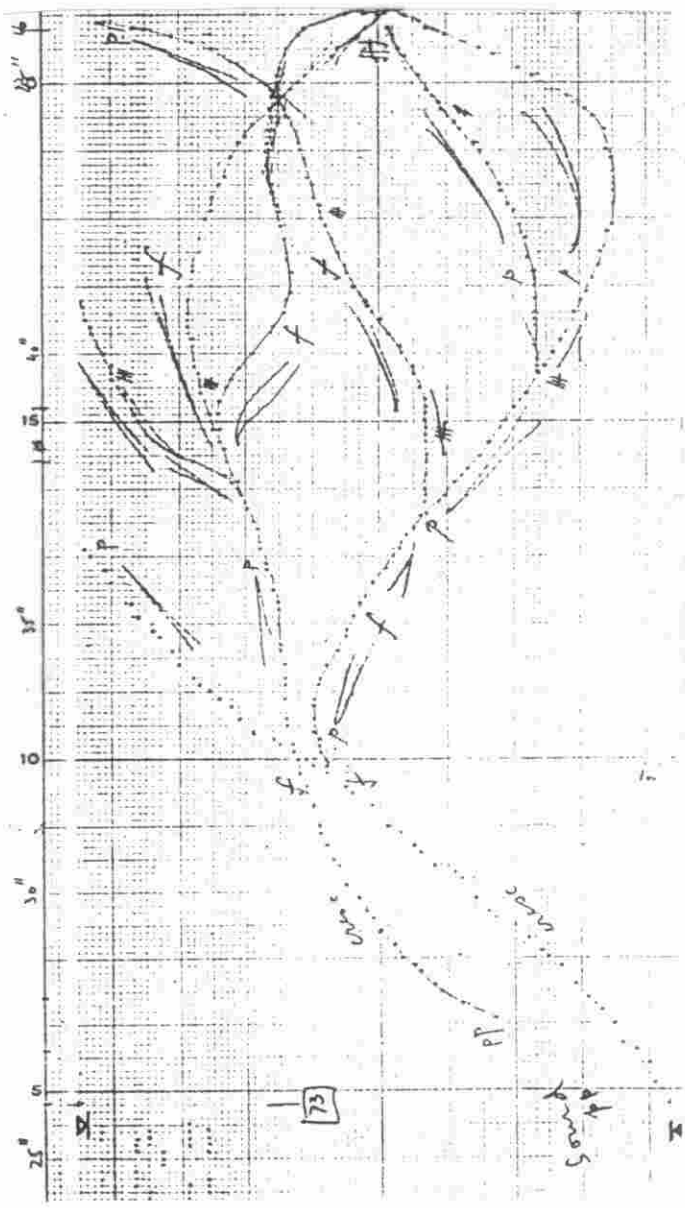

Figure 2
Evryali, graphic sketch of arborescences (from manuscript).

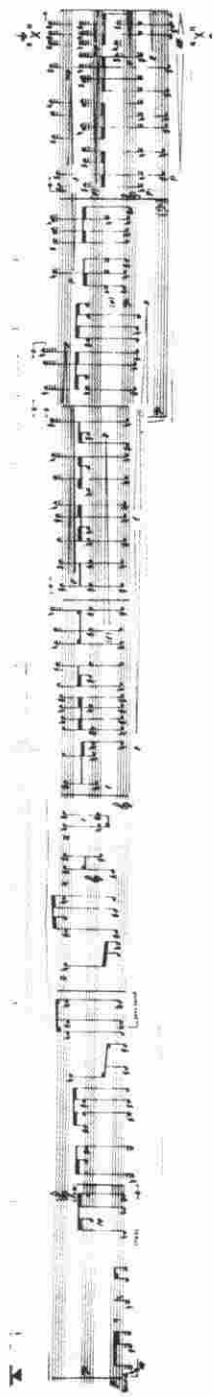

Figure 3
Evryali, notated version of same arborescences (pp. 8–9).

cannot be accomplished with two hands. But this solution raises other problems. For one, the original notation on four staves (figure 5), while not easy to read, does render explicit the linear quality of the piece, avoiding the chordal, vertical character of the "reduction." Also, and more importantly, this is how the composer wanted his piece to be perceived by the performer, and even if it isn't any of his business anymore, I feel that this notational *fact* should at least be allowed to impinge psychologically on the performer and influence the direction of his interpretation. Notational idiosyncrasies, however out of touch with a performative reality they might be (and this reality is often illusory anyway, based in an unquestioned, inherited performance practice), contribute to the power of a piece. Interpreters must channel all this information, not rearrange it to suit their own perceptual needs.

V. "Arrangement" (Hill)

A far more Draconian proposal (at least potentially) is that of "arrangement," not merely "transcription," but choosing a certain predetermined pathway and fixing it in writing – performing surgery on the material level. As with orchestral reductions, elements that are considered superfluous are eliminated so that one pianist can realize the essentials (figure 6). In any case, it is of course inevitable

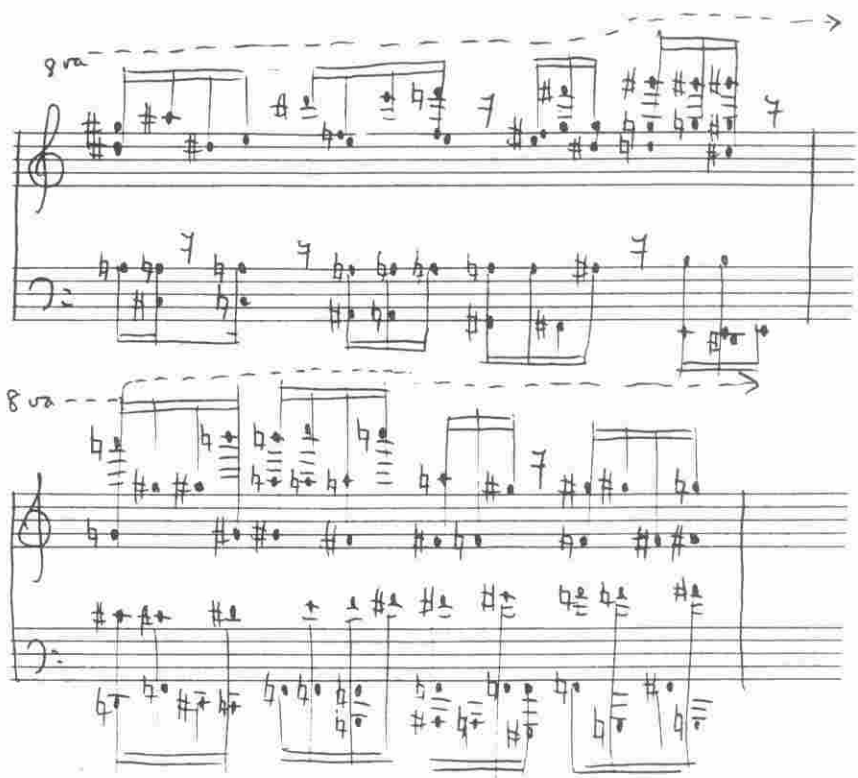

Figure 4
***Evryali*, author's reduction on to two staves of passage from p. 9.**

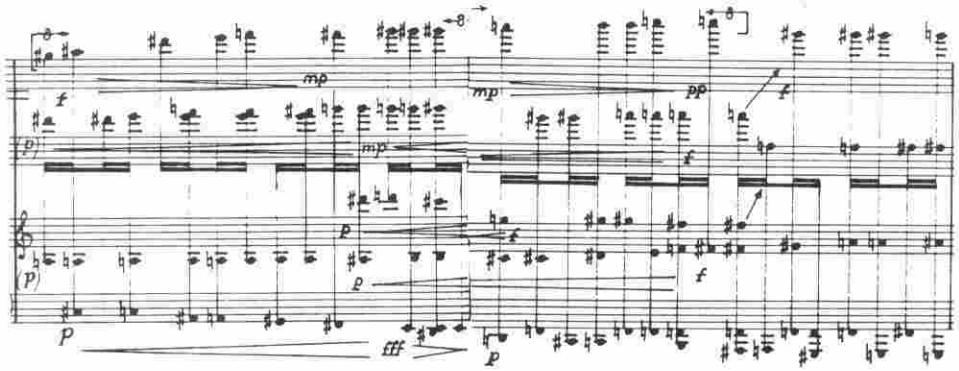

Figure 5
Evryali, notated version of same passage from p. 9.

that the pianist must choose a pathway, considering the impossibilities to be faced. What's more, the performer must fix a certain pathway before performing in public, to minimize the risk of getting lost and resorting to emergency improvisation in the heat of the moment.

The problem with Hill's rationale is that it excludes the notion of a performer's ever-changing relationship with the work, an essential component in the performance of any work from any period. A version that might correspond to a performer's current capacities, or current priorities within the global scheme, might not be adequate for a future performance, when he or she might have conceivably acquired enough facility to be able to add more parts. The pianist might also decide that the choices made earlier are no longer the ones that will contribute to an optimal rendition of the "global effect," i.e. the illusion of several simultaneous lines. (One must also keep in mind what one is *not* playing – the negative interpretation is always pregnantly present. In Hill's filtered version, the complete *Evryali* never really exists; it is cut down to size before even being translated to sound.) In this, we reach a basic philosophical question, central to *Evryali*: would it be possible, in ten years, to realize 100 per cent of the score? Or has a definitive line been crossed whereby no advance in performance technique will ever enable one pianist to accomplish this?

VI. Priorities: Tempo (Couroux)

The central question of *Evryali* is essentially the same one as is inevitably encountered in any performance situation: what are its priorities? That is, what must be saved at all costs, and which details are expendable? Different performers adopt different strategies. Takahashi arpeggiates some of the impossible chords in the middle section (mostly in the left hand), thereby inducing a drastic reduction of the original tempo (figure 7). The bottom line, regardless of whether one agrees with Takahashi's choices or not, is the fact that the composer himself approved this solution, and even proposed it to several pianists who subsequently performed *Evryali* (Pelletier 1993). My own solution has been to prioritize the tempo, keeping it steady, and sacrificing some of the exact pitches for the massed, global result. (Can this be the prototype for a new kind of work

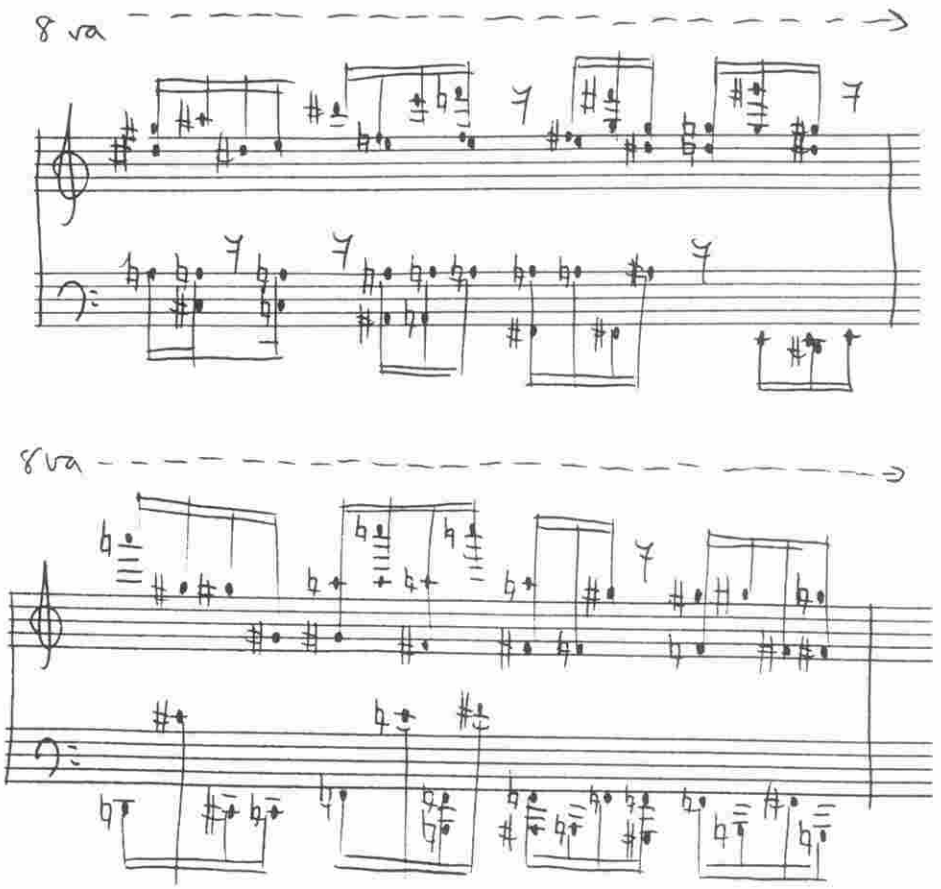

Figure 6
***Evryali*, author's reduction of same passage from p. 9, with omitted notes.**

whereby the global effect always wins at the expense of local detail? How different indeed this conception is from the traditional phenomenon of a global picture emerging from the smallest detail.) Even though it doesn't look like it superficially, could *Evryali* thus be a kind of "open work," not with regard to the macro-level of the form, but open enough to allow distinctly different interpretations on the local level?

VII. Contour Adjustment

Hill crossed the ethical line with the proposition that certain sections of the piece be literally rewritten to suit the performer's capacities, reinforcing his natural insecurity when faced with the impossible – make it possible at whatever cost. He proposed reducing the span of certain chords (vertically) to make them digitally accessible, thereby cramming the counterpoint into a tighter ambitus, directly impinging on the voice leading. As well, he proposed to transpose certain notes and lines up or down an octave, prioritizing, it would seem, pitch-class content

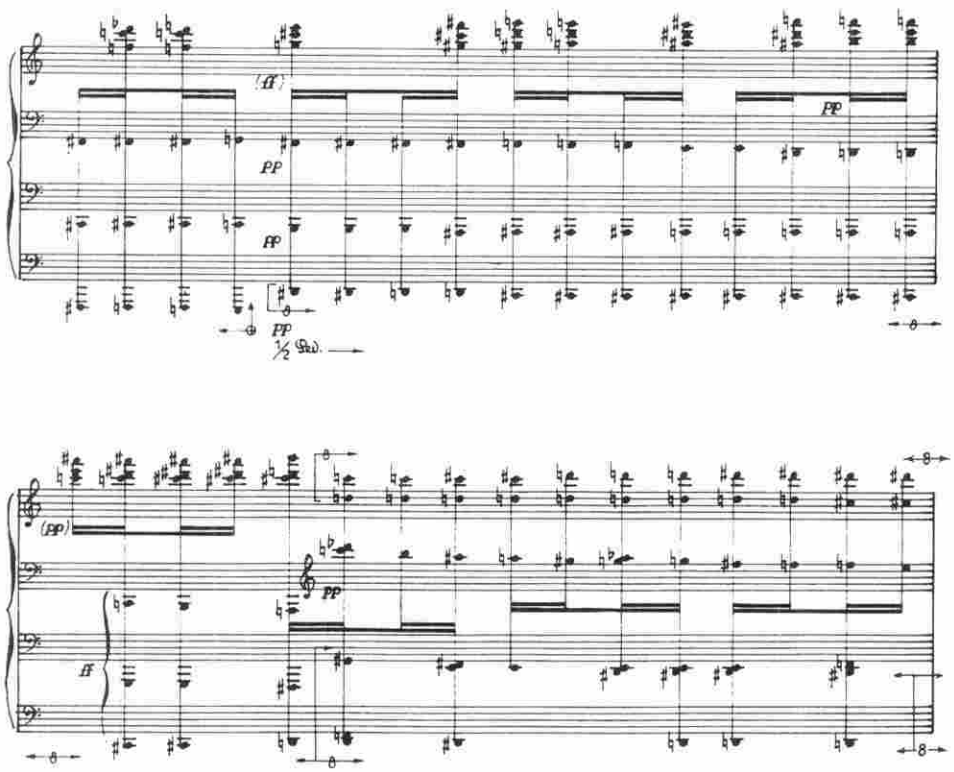

Figure 7
***Evryali*, central section, p. 16.**

over contour. Hill obviously misunderstood the basic tenets of *Evryali* and "arborescent counterpoint," for this cavalier octave transposition shatters any linear contrapuntal progression the work might have had. Takahashi sums it up succinctly in his reply to Hill's article: "*Evryali* is not a 12-tone etude" (Takahashi 1975: 53).

VIII. Improvisation?

Evryali is not an aleatoric, indeterminate work either. Every human effort must be made to realize the entire score, in its originally notated version, with nothing left to chance. This being said, any performer who states that he or she has never lapsed into improvisation at any point in performing *Evryali* is probably being dishonest. If one chooses to maintain the rapid-fire tempo, certain sections become so dense with lines that they become difficult to hear and thus control physically.

In the static-block sections, as in figure 8, Hill treats *Evryali* like proportional graph-music: dots that are haphazardly placed on music paper are to be realized according to general shape and not to be treated literally, thus encouraging improvisation. This section is extremely difficult to hear, even to imagine. We are not used to listening within sounds, as is the case here – an 8-note chord with a

very active inner life, whose density is rapidly varied according to a stochastic distribution. I suggest a different solution: creating mock periodicities within the seemingly chaotic density distribution.

IX. Structuration (Couroux)

The main thrust behind such a technique is to make this section (cf. figure 8) and others like it mnemonically accessible. I have developed a number of "structurating" concepts:

R = repetition (when certain notes are repeated in a prominent manner);
T = the total eight notes present;
C = complement (hands are here treated separately, four notes apiece) – when two notes are followed, either linearly or vertically by the two other notes present in the 4-note chord;
M = a particularly "memorable" melody (this is of course a personal matter);
I = inverse – a pattern which is reversed (retrograded).

Obviously, these are only ads to grasping and controlling the material. There are several dangers to be strictly avoided. First, combining the linear with the vertical engenders the danger of confusion rather than mnemonic retention. Second, it is possible that certain memorable melodies will instill an urge to accentuate unevenly. This goes against the principle of the mechanical, "natural," "stochasticatto" attacks required (which makes it even harder to hear within the

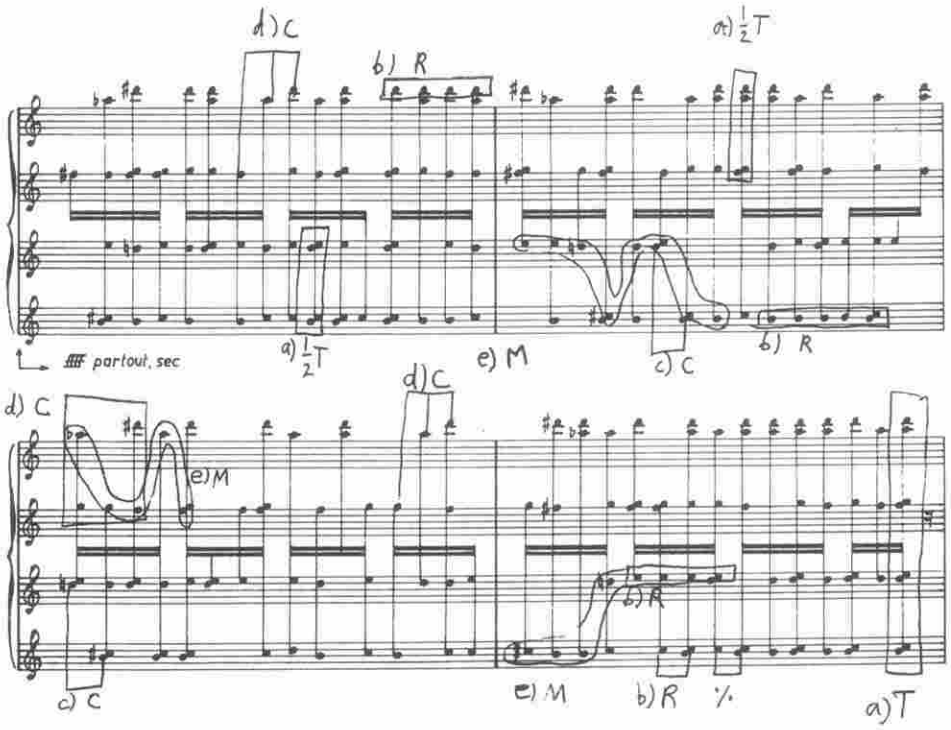

Figure 8
***Evryali*, statistical block, p. 7, with author's "structuration" notes.**

8-note chord). It is almost impossible to realize it perfectly, even though it is eminently possible physically. The energy expended in attempting this passage contributes to the end musical result. An improvised version of the same passage would not, in my opinion, engender the tensile, constrained quality desired.

X. Leaping!

In order to be able to give the impression of playing all the lines at once in dense contrapuntal passages, the most logical solution seems to be that of leaping from line to line, maintaining the life of a line for long enough by constantly nourishing it with attacks. This technique constitutes one of the most athletic aspects of *Evryali* and, needless to say, remains a dangerous venture at best. The pitfalls of this proposition are numerous, especially the inaccuracy of leaps due to the rapid tempo (although a leap in the general area of the goal is better than nothing). Also, "periodic jumping," the leaping between two lines following a regular pattern (figure 9), is to be avoided as it gives the impression of one resultant (albeit disjointed) line instead of two chromatically stepwise lines. The trick is to leap "aperiodically," following the logic of the lines first and foremost, but while thinking of two (or more) separate lines (attributing different dynamic nuances to each line helps this task, within a general dynamic context) (figure 10). With this technique in mind, faults and all, it seems preferable to leap than simply to omit lines, which would drastically reduce the power of the piece.

I also use a colored-pencil method, to highlight (or circle) in red what I can play with the right hand, and in blue for the left. This leaves open the possibility of circling more notes as one acquires greater performative ease.

XI. Taming the Wild Sea

Playing *Evryali* is akin to "taming the wild sea" (one of the meanings of the word "*evryali*"). Constraints and solutions imposed on the work, whatever they might be, can aid in harnessing this monster. The key word remains "lucidity," accepting the impossible and dealing rationally with it, without resorting to

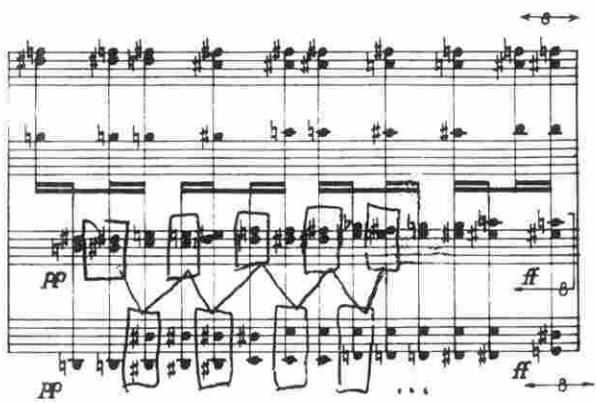

Figure 9
Evryali, passage from p. 17, showing periodic leaping.

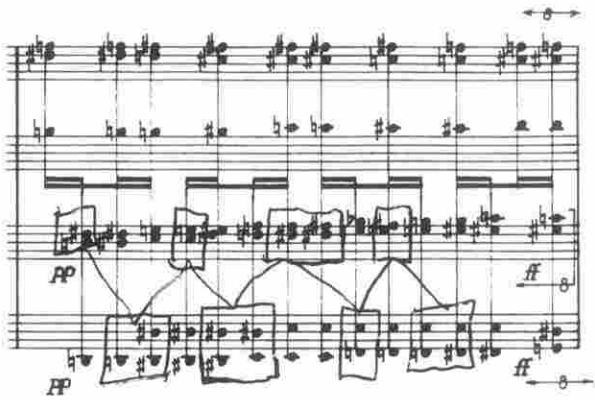

Figure 10
***Evryali*, same passage from p. 17, showing aperiodic leaping.**

subterfugal improvisation. Most of all, keeping in mind the extraordinary aesthetic beauty of the piece (and the overwhelming simplicity of the arborescent graphs at the root of it all) can, I believe, inspire a performer never to give up striving for perfection. I remember meeting Xenakis in 1994 and him asking me whether I "rethought *Evryali* every time I played it." It was a difficult question to be asked, and I still remember it every time I sit down to play the piece. The uneasiness remains, and so do the scars of having breached a seemingly unbreachable performative ethic.

The fact that one cannot physically realize the totality of *Evryali* makes it seem unnecessarily utopian. The task of any performer is to strive, regardless of difficulty, to achieve every detail and to project them onto a broader context. The problem of *Evryali* is only situated on another semantic level. It would be interesting to see how the piece would stand up as a monument if realized by a computer. Would it have the same tension, the same struggle? At this critical juncture in the study of the relationship between performer and instrument, never so complex as it is now, *Evryali* remains a milestone in Western performance practice. It is high time to study this music carefully for what it can ultimately teach us about the performer's responsibility, but also about the true function of the musician and the artist in Western culture.

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