

Reflections on Performing the String Music of Iannis Xenakis

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(in conversation with James Harley, updated February 2001)

This article discusses primarily the chamber music for strings by Iannis Xenakis from the point of view of the performer. The author has premiered a number of these compositions. Various technical and musical issues are raised as well as anecdotes relating to the author's interaction with the composer.

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Irvine Arditti is well known as one of the foremost interpreters of contemporary music. The Arditti String Quartet has been performing since 1974 and has engendered a vast repertoire of new works for string quartet, solo strings, and various permutations and combinations of chamber strings with other instruments. The group has worked closely with a number of composers, arguably including most of the important composers living in the latter half of the twentieth century (and beyond). One of the closest professional relationships the quartet developed was with Iannis Xenakis, whose music has posed formidable problems for performers, particularly in the realm of strings. It would be no exaggeration to say that the Arditti Quartet has taken the interpretation of Xenakis' music to another level, to such an extent that his music for chamber strings is very much identified with this ensemble. Irvine Arditti gives numerous master classes around the world, but until now has not had an occasion to record his thoughts on performing the uniquely challenging music of Xenakis.

I. First Meeting: *Mikka, Mikka "S"*

I remember vividly my first meeting with Iannis, which must have been in the early 1970s. I was about to give what I believe was the British premiere of *Mikka*. I really didn't understand well how to play this piece, so I took myself to Paris to ask his advice. We met at his atelier. I had been pondering the very fast *glissandi* (covering more than three octaves), and I told him that this was impossible to play. His reply was that I might find it so now, but that in the future I would find a way to do it. Well, *Mikka* never got easier, but my understanding of the way to

perform Xenakis' music transcended the normal confines of traditional string playing. I was eventually able to understand and give an impression of what he intended.

It immediately became clear that I needed to produce a different kind of string sound, completely without vibrato, and with lots of high partials for the *sul ponticello* sections. (Unfortunately, the words "*senza vibrato partout*" were omitted from the first edition of *Mikka*.) The idea was that I should play like a bird (or an oscillator), as if free from the limitations of the four strings, almost like a single-string instrument without the problems of crossing strings, at the same time guarding the different timbral characteristics of each string. It took a great deal of practice to produce ascending and descending *glissandi* in an even manner. It is still impossible to play the extremely wide, quick *glissandi* near the beginning, as the distance covered is just too far. A three-octave *glissando* in an eighth of a second is physically not possible. As an interpreter, one has to make decisions about limitations such as these and almost invent new ways of thinking.

Xenakis was one of the first contemporary composers to force me to confront these problems. His own orientation comes not from an orthodox musical training but from the architectural world (from his training as an engineer and his work with Le Corbusier). Graphic representations of the music may help a string player to understand better the kind of sound Xenakis is aiming for. In any case, performances of *Mikka* and *Mikka "S"* have become much more fluent over the years. I remember the recording for *Disques Montaigne*¹ being done in very large, almost complete takes.

II. *Dikhthas*

There has always been a little frustration for me that Xenakis never wrote a solo violin work of the length and substance of the cello pieces, *Nomos Alpha* (1966) or *Kottos* (1977). I have to be satisfied with *Dikhthas* (1979), but of course this piece requires a very competent pianist, first to be able to play the difficult piano part, and then to be able to play together with the violin. For me, *Dikhthas* belongs to one of three or four works by this composer that are beautifully proportioned and that hold the listener on the edge throughout; *Ikhoor* (1978), for string trio, and *Tetras* (1983), for string quartet, also come to mind. It is difficult to know whether Xenakis was influenced in writing *Dikhthas* by its dedicatee, the Italian violinist Salvatore Accardo. In any case, the scale and arpeggio passages, as well as the pedal sections on D natural, are reminiscent of virtuoso nineteenth-century techniques. But these passages are integrated so well into the fabric of the piece that the music always clearly sounds like Xenakis.

III. First Commission: *Tetras*

Having only the two *Mikka* pieces to play myself, and *Ikhoor* and *ST/4* (1962) to play with the quartet, you can imagine my joy when *Tetras* appeared, written especially for us. The Quartet hadn't had too much contact with Xenakis before 1983, so I am not sure whether the energy of *Tetras* came as a logical continuation of his compositional thought at the time, or as a result of knowing what the Arditti Quartet could do, or a mixture of both. That would have been a better

question for him, perhaps. It is true, in any case, that *Tetras* is probably the pinnacle of Xenakis' string writing.

This piece certainly poses many problems of interpretation. At the time, my thoughts went back to my earlier meeting with Xenakis for *Mikka*. How were we to solve the problems of each section in *Tetras*? First, we inserted bar-lines to break up the long stretches of music into understandable meters. Then, how were we to play the rhythmic *glissando* sections, which require "touching" the turning-point pitches of the contours but not lingering on them? How were we to interpret the extraordinarily complex rhythmic differentiations in the chordal passage, and what sort of sound were we to produce? How were we to integrate the noise sounds into the general texture of the piece? And there were many other questions . . .

When one begins to understand the graph-like trajectories, as in *Mikka*, the individual notes become less important. I remember that when we were rehearsing in Lisbon in 1983, Iannis was most interested in finding the right character for each section, in particular for the noise-like sounds, leaving the technical difficulties to us. A work like *Tetras* continues to be challenging even after hundreds of performances, as it never seems to get any easier. So it could never be described as boring to play. This is true of many contemporary pieces that push us to the limits. The interpretation of a work like *Tetras* obviously grows and evolves over the years, and can never be fully accomplished in the beginning.

IV. Piano Quintet: *Akea*

After a series of concerts in the early 1980s, culminating with the Centre Acanthes Summer Course in 1985,² it seemed evident that Xenakis was very happy with the collaboration between the Arditti Quartet and pianist Claude Helffer. We presented programs including string pieces, solo piano works, and *Dikthas*. In fact, it was Iannis who had first introduced me to Claude, so it was no surprise to learn that he wanted to write *Akea*, for string quartet and piano, to a commission from the 1986 Festival D'Automne in Paris.

For me, there are very few similarities between *Dikthas* and *Akea*. The latter was the first chamber work in what seemed to be a new Xenakis style, particularly in contrast to the exuberance and energy of *Tetras*. In a way, Xenakis was probably quite brave to think about a piano quintet, the most classical of formations. There are few in the second part of the twentieth century to talk about. Interestingly, there is one indication in the score to play with vibrato. A reference to something more classical? No, this is meant to be a "waver" in pitch, as in *Dikthas*, not a traditional nineteenth-century vibrato. This clarification came from the composer's mouth during our initial rehearsals for the premiere.

V. Later Quartets: *Tetora*, *Ergma*

The same concerns of interpretation apply to *Tetora* (1990), the second quartet Xenakis wrote for us, although here, the difficulties are very different. This piece takes us to a new sound world. There are no "effects," and the familiar *glissandi* and complicated rhythmic layerings are dismissed for a simpler sound world. In fact, the difficulties are found in the simplicity of this music. *Tetora* has a different

sort of energy to *Tetras*. Instead, one must adopt more of a quasi-Baroque approach for pitching chords beautifully (always with no vibrato), but keeping the dynamic force of new music. In fact, the eight-note chords in *Tetora*, played by the full quartet, are extremely difficult to pitch and to play cleanly but with force, especially when there are large leaps between each chord. These repeated chords are difficult to tune and “*portamenti*” (to aid locating the pitches) is neither required nor desired, so it is very difficult to “prepare” these very high positions. In many ways, *Tetora* is more difficult to play than *Tetras*, and even if performed well, its austere character seems to attract less audience recognition for doing so.

The Arditti Quartet has never played the later quartet, *Ergma* (1994). It is similar to *Tetora*, and poses similar problems, but is shorter and somewhat simpler. Of the four quartets (counting *ST/4*), for sheer exhaustive energy, *Tetras* wins hands down. Truly, there is so much loud *tremolando* material in the last part of the piece that it is impossible to think of playing anything after it without a break.

VI. String Sextet: *Ittidra*

Ittidra, for string sextet, the ultimate homage to our group,³ poses similar problems to *Tetora*, but in twelve parts. The chords are really thick and difficult to hear, especially with the addition of two extra players. The high first violin part in particular poses a problem in terms of sonority, as it is inherently difficult to sustain a high, loud double-stop for long durations. This is because the strings are very much shorter in this register. It is virtually impossible to draw long slow bows while the fingers are stopping the strings at such a short distance from the bridge and play at the same dynamic level as the others.

VII. Concerto for Solo Violin: *Dox-Orkh*

Dox-Orkh (1991), for violin and orchestra, poses the soloist with somewhat different problems. Although the work is well written, in being conceived as a dialogue between violin and orchestra (the soloist rarely has the problem of being drowned out), the violin still has to compete, in terms of presence, against the sheer volume of the orchestra. In the composer’s words, it is a “David and Goliath” situation. In a large hall, one really has to project to achieve this idea of duality. Classical soloists use vibrato as a device for “expanding” their sound; this, of course, is not permitted in the music of Xenakis!

All the forceful methods of producing sound learned from playing *Tetras* (considered “ugly” to more conservatively trained string players) need to be put into use for *Dox-Orkh*. I suggest that the bow needs to be gripped more aggressively, in order to produce a coarser, stronger sound. It is also desirable to separate the soloist in space from the orchestra as much as is possible, so that the sound is heard independently. This, though, is not always possible.

In the solo part of *Dox-Orkh*, there are some rather unorthodox problems of contrary motion *glissandi* to solve, which, if one were thinking classically, would seem to be impossible to play. Once again, Xenakis asks the player to find new solutions of how to cross the fingers in order to give the impression that the *glissandi* are crossing. This technique was first used in *Mikka “S”* and expanded in *Dikhthas*.

VIII. Stylistic Evolution

Over the years, Xenakis' music has become more rarefied and less concerned with the idea of "mass" textures. He has focused on certain features, "composing" the focus, so to speak. He has made the scope of the sonic image much simpler. In doing this, the idea of form has also become much simpler, and, for me, more difficult to accept, although some of these works in the later style have now grown on me.

Xenakis is not a traditional "musician's composer," in that he comes from a completely other world. This other world has been fascinating for me, and I consider him to be at the forefront of expanding string sonorities in the second part of the twentieth century. Perhaps because of his origins, he is less inclined to be specific about exactly how to execute his music, preferring to leave it to the players to find a way. Having found this "way," the knowledge should be passed to all who wish to interpret his music. It really disturbs me to hear other string players using vibrato, when specifically told not to. Even if it is not explicitly stated in the score or the part, Xenakis' music is always much purer and better heard without any vibrato. This is the way he wanted it to be heard!

With the death of Xenakis this past February, the new music world has lost one of its most important figures. The original and controversial works as *Metastaseis*, *Pithoprakta*, and *Eonta* have fascinated and stimulated many, and Xenakis was able to chart his very own completely original style of composing. Without him, who knows if composers of today would have the freedom to follow their imagination, unhindered.

Thank you, Iannis.

Appendix. Works written by Xenakis for the Arditti String Quartet or Its Members.

Title	Year	Instrumentation
<i>Tetras</i>	1983	String quartet
<i>Akea</i>	1986	Piano quintet
<i>Epicycle</i>	1989	Cello solo, mixed ensemble
<i>Tetora</i>	1990	String quartet
<i>Dox-Orkh</i>	1991	Violin solo, orchestra
<i>Roscobeck</i>	1996	Cello, double bass
<i>Ittidra</i>	1996	String sextet

Notes

1. *Disques Montaigne* 782005 (1992) was recorded in 1991.
2. Association Acanthes organizes an annual Summer Course in the south of France (up to 1986 in Aix-en-Provence, thereafter in Villeneuve-les-Avignon). It normally lasts two weeks, but in 1985, as part of European Music Year, the course was extended to six weeks, dividing the time between Aix-en-Provence, Salzburg, and Delphi. That year, the featured composer was Xenakis, and the Arditti Quartet and Claude Helffer (among others) joined him for the entire duration.
3. The title is the retrograde of "Arditti." Xenakis titled a number of his later pieces in similar fashion: *Hunem-Iduthey* (1996), for violin and cello, from "Yehudi Menuhin;" *Roscobeck* (1996), for cello and double bass, from "Rohan de Saram," "Stefano Scodanibbio," and "Wolfgang Becker."

