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As For Me, I *Love* the Sea! A Homage

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For me, it was when I made a trip to Delphi, Greece, that I first gleaned a sense of the "place" of Xenakis' music.[1] It was August; it was very hot; there were shooting stars clearly visible in the dark, warm sky; the cicadas were shrill, their "clouds" of sound dense and complex; the terrain was wild, with towering cliffs and rough vegetation; the ambience exuded ancient mystery, home of the oracles. *Pléïades*, for six percussion, was performed in the ancient stadium, the monstrously difficult polyrhythms and deafening metallic sounds bracingly clear under the open sky. *La légende d'Eer*, Xenakis' vast and cosmic electroacoustic piece, was presented as an offering late one night, the loudspeakers set in a circle in a grove of pine trees at the edge of a cliff dropping off to the ancient olive groves that spill down the valley to the Gulf of Corinth. The opening high sounds, fluted trills, arose from the calls of the cicadas, a perfect symbiosis.

It is easy to become preoccupied with Xenakis' rational side, with the theories and compositional techniques. The ideas he put forward so forcefully and the ways in which he applied them in his music will keep researchers busy for a long time to come. But one should not overlook the poetic side of Xenakis' work. A glance through his catalogue reveals not a compendium of "scientific" titles (though there are some), but a list of titles reflecting, or inspired by, primarily natural phenomena. And the source for many of these is water, and more specifically, the sea.

The second experience of the sense of "place" in Xenakis' music for me came from reading *Moi j'aime pas la mer*, a book of finely crafted prose by his wife, Françoise Xenakis. In this sharp-witted, though affectionate, work, the author evokes the family's forty-some years of summer vacations on the Mediterranean, paddling around Corsica and other islands in a kayak. If one's ordinary experience of the water is of the seaside, short visits to frolic or relax, as most people's is, then one would have difficulty relating the fierceness of *Evryali* or *Aïs* to such benign impressions. But if, as Mme Xenakis describes, one is paddling against the wind, for days on end with no land in sight, at the utter mercy of the elements, one would no doubt draw a more powerful, profound inspiration from the experience.

> For hours, I've been rowing.
> For hours, I've been dreaming.
> The whole troop is here. It's the last leg.
> Grouped together. Unified by one movement. Heads joined by a single gaze.
> Corollas upon blossoming corollas.

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> Rigor. Beauty.
> For hours, I've been rowing, for hours I've been sketching this fabulous ballet, driving me wild with desire: A BARREL OF SMOKED HERRING . . .
>
> At the next village we moor at, I'll eat three herring at once . . .
>
> If we moor at all. For this time, it has begun badly.
> The sun is already low, the waves are getting stronger and stronger and we're in the open sea.
> The great open sea.
>
> (Xenakis 1994: 9–10, trans. Marc Couroux)

The notion of "flux," so important for Xenakis' multi-dimensional conception of form, is also a life-or-death force on the water, manifested as powerful currents that can sweep a small boat onto the rocks, or irrevocably out to sea. The constellations are not just to be admired, but vital for nocturnal navigation. The spray of waves breaking on the rocks makes beautiful patterns, but out in a kayak, the salt stings the skin and the eyes, and the waves can damage and destroy.

> This year, we're crossing the sea in a straight line. "You'll see: four days of rowing, ten hours a day, no problem, it will be magnificent. I've calculated everything and there won't be anyone there." . . . We're not talking anymore, our teeth clenched, where a little wind just above the surface of the water can knock the paddle out of your hands, flinging it in your face, the moment your attention wanes or your wrist weakens. . . . On the night of the third day we reach the islands. I had been seeing yachts heading toward them for hours already but . . .
>
> The storm is at its strongest but we have to round the point, there, where ten years ago our daughter swam for the first time without a life-jacket: where fifteen years ago we lived naked, alone for a month; where thirteen years ago he killed a grouper and never forgave himself, there, where the sea is deepening . . .
>
> We have to round this point.
> The sea is so strong that there are troughs of over four meters. He threads a rope between his boat and the one we, the women, are on. . . . The rope will break, we're at the peak of a wave on the verge of breaking, we should thrust ahead but him, he stops and we back up . . .
> We pass.
> Then, we're propelled toward the shore and we have to fling ourselves into the water to avoid being crushed by the rollers. Our entire body is shaking . . .
> He stretches out, all his muscles intertwined.
> The child and I think we should row with all our might but the waves were too contrary and much stronger than our thrust and it was him with the cable that pulled us along . . .
>
> (Xenakis 1994: 146–151, trans. Marc Couroux)

Of course, Mme Xenakis has penned her own poetic memoir, and the reader has no way of knowing the verity of her stories (though one has no real reason to doubt them). But it is clear that these expeditions to the sea were an integral part of their lives.

It is perhaps best to close by letting Xenakis have his own voice, in listing the

various titles and associated texts from his compositions that come from, or owe some influence from, the sea. Ideally, the reader will then go to the music, so that the composer can really speak for himself, through the sonic creations he used to express himself, his "place."

Achorripsis (1957) – chamber orchestra
"jets of sound"

Syrmos (1959) – string ensemble
"traces, trails"

Medea (1967) – concert suite for men's choir, small mixed ensemble
Text: Seneca's *Medea* (taken from a description of the maritime journey of the Argonauts as they returned home with Medea and the Golden Fleece).

> groaned as if with the sound of thunder;
> the trapped sea soaked their peaks
> and even the clouds.
> Brave Tiphys paled and all
> the tiller ropes he let slip from his faltering hand . . .

Eridanos (1972) – orchestra
"quarrelsome, ancient river of Athens"

Evryali (1973) – piano
"open sea, Medusa"

Cendrées (1974) – mixed choir, orchestra
Text: none, but the composer affixed a quote of his own creation to the foreword.

> Before autumn, before summer, before each season, when the sky is fluffy, when it descends and meets the earth, all is white like opaline then: and it lasts sometimes, a long time. Neither fog nor dew, but ashenness.

Windungen (1976) – cello ensemble
"turn, coil, meander"

Jonchaies (1977) – orchestra
"rushes, reeds"

Pléïades (1978) – percussion ensemble
"the constellation of the seven daughters of Atlas, pluralities"

Anemoessa (1979) – mixed choir, orchestra
"exposed to the wind"

Aïs (1980) – baritone solo, percussion solo, orchestra
"Hades, domain of the dead"
(The music includes reference to the spine-chilling cry of the kestrel, a Mediterranean sea-bird.)

Mists (1980) – piano

Embellie (1981) – viola
"lull in the storm"

Pour les baleines (1982) – string orchestra
"The fight for the right to life of the whales and dolphins is part of the fight for human rights, trampled upon so much just about everywhere today."

Naama (1984) – harpsichord
"flux"

Nyuyo (1985) – shakuhacki, sangen, 2 kotos
"setting sun"

À l'île de Gorée (1986) – harpsichord solo, ensemble
Island of Gorée (Senegal, between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, one of the largest slave-trading posts.)

Horos (1986) – orchestra
"landmark"

Jalons (1986) – ensemble
"signposts, landmarks"

Kyania (1991) – orchestra
"cyan" (a bluish, ultramarine color)

Krinoidi (1991) – orchestra
"crinoids" (a class of echinoderms, or sea animals, that are radially symmetrical, in the form of a lily, or "krinon")

Roáï (1991) – orchestra
"flux" (flow, current, transfer, fusion)

Paille in the Wind (1992) – cello, piano
"straw in the wind"

Sea Nymphs (1994) – mixed choir
Text:

> Full fathom five thy father lies,
> Of his bones are coral made:
> Those are pearls that were his eyes.
> Nothing of him that doth fade,
> But doth suffer a sea-change
> Into something rich and strange . . .
> Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell.
> Ding-dong.
> Hark! now I hear them–
> Ding-dong bell.
>
> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (Ariel's song, Act I, Scene 2)

Voile (1995) – string ensemble
"sail, veil"

Ioolkos (1996) – orchestra
"homeland of Jason, leader of the Argonauts"

Sea-Change (1997) – orchestra
"To the memory of a child who played a Shakespearian role in *The Tempest*"

Reference

Xenakis, Francoise (1994) *Moi j'aime pas la mer*. Paris: Éditions Balland.

Note

1. The Centre Acanthes Summer Course, sponsored by Association Acanthes, featured the music of Iannis Xenakis in 1985. As part of European Music Year, the course, which is normally held for two weeks in the south of France, was extended to six weeks, and moved from Aix-en-Provence to Salzburg to Delphi.