

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Composer Portraits: Iannis Xenakis
Wednesday, October 17, 2009 at 8:00PM

I was often frustrated when I played Iannis Xenakis's music for him. Everything *seemed* right—he was engaged, friendly, and grateful to performers who took on the enormous challenges in his scores. It was just that I wanted a certain kind of input from him. I wanted to know if my triplets were too fast, or if he wanted a phrase to end in a certain way. In short I wanted to follow the predominating model of interpretation in classical music; I wanted a *reading* from him. A reading in music is a simulacrum, an embodiment of a score. But what Xenakis offered was not embodiment, but the body itself. He did not deal primarily in signs but in constructions, in the palpability and complexity of interrelated structures. As a result the music of Xenakis has a refreshing concreteness: here one finds the structures of ritual, the nuts and bolts of rhythm, and above all a fascination with the musical object. In Xenakis the questions always seem to be about things: how many are there, how are they related to each other, and how do we as musicians and listeners move among them? The need to find one's path among and around structures rather than within the more ambiguous plasma of language marks Xenakis as one of the first truly post-19th century composers.

The concreteness of Xenakis's music often translates as a visceral experience in performance. And indeed the music is often right in your face: loud, sometimes strident, and always engaged. But the deeper poetry of his music goes beyond the concrete. It derives its strength not from the fixity of structures, but from the fluidity of relationships. These relationships—among musical objects, and between music and people comprise the critical catalyst that makes all the difference. Without them, what might be blunt or even banal music becomes complex and vital; performances that could seem violent become instead passionate.

Tonight's concert looks inside the mind of Iannis Xenakis through pairs of works, pairings designed to illuminate the interplay between complex musical structures and the people who play and listen to them. From the percussive bookends of *Psappha* and *O-Mega*, through *Akanthos* and *Échange*, two pieces for soloist and ensemble, and finally to *Palimpest* and *Thallein* each for small chamber group, the questions tonight are about the dynamic force of relationships.

Psappha and *Akanthos* connect to *Kassandra* to form the archipelago of Xenakis's life-long fascination with female energy and its translation into musical terms. The rhythmic template of *Psappha* is drawn from the poetry of Sappho. The body of Sapphic rhythm is then to be "cloaked" (to use the composer's word) by percussive sonorities that are to be chosen by the performer. Tonight's version is a bare-bones version of percussion with small, sonically impoverished objects. The sounds may be loud as one would expect with Xenakis, but they are spectrally simple: small pipes, a frying pan, and assorted drums. The idea in interpretation is to find a balance between the corpus of unadorned pulses and the sounds chosen to represent them. Further by asking the percussionist to choose a unique set of instruments—essentially asking that each percussionist configure the set of instruments around the size and shape of his or her body—Xenakis creates a sonogram of the physicality of each performer. Its partner piece *Omega*, a fitting name for Xenakis's final work, is a short offering for percussion soloist and chamber group. The vivid interplay of sounds and colors found in *Psappha* is absent here, and the soloist speaks in the monochromatic tones of a graduated set of drums.

Akanthos (thorns) belies its name by providing us with some of the most approachable harmonies and welcoming musical spaces in all of the composer's output. The ensemble music of the piece encircles the solo soprano line, rarely allowing her to occupy a registerally distinct and privileged position. As a result the voice usually comes from within the field of sound and thus transforms the whole ensemble into voice. The open sounds of the strings and winds sing in a literal way, but the vocal mapping also extends to the clicks of consonants (as polyrhythmic piano writing) and the noises of breath and tongue (as the hiss of a bowed cello bridge or the grinding squeaks of over-pressured string playing that Xenakis calls *en grinçant*.)

Something similar happens in *Échange* where the solo bass clarinet maps a spectrum of sonic possibility from the liquid tones of its low register to the jarring squeals of multiphonics. Following suit, the tempo spans a gamut from a metronome marking of 15 (!) to the quarter-note to

pulsations as fast as 480 beats per minute. And as a mirror of tempo there are similar explorations of texture, density, and articulation. The pace of the “exchanges” of tempo and timbre seem unpredictable; landmarks which at first seem never to arrive later whiz by at frightening speeds. Here as is often the case with Xenakis, we are asked to find our place but the map doesn’t always make sense. We search for a grid, but are given a landscape.

Palimpsest explodes the rhythmic map altogether. Here plurality is evident in rhythm and rhythms. Single lines splinter into as many 11 different individual polyrhythmic threads at a time. In the traditional practice of palimpsest parchments were used and then scraped for re-use. The overwriting of texts left traces so that everything new continued to carry forward something of the old. Or, seen from the other vantage point, the old was consumed in service of the new. So in *Palimpsest* rhythms are layered one on another; sonorities stacked and even the stage set-up reflects the idea that some instruments are visible and audible only by looking through and beyond others. **Thallein**, perhaps the evening’s most ambitious work echoes the theme of newness. The title means “budding,” and features the composer’s trademark arborescent structures. From a basic rhythmic substrate multiple and complex layers of sound issue forth—each an elaboration of the previous one until the sounding space is saturated. Then Xenakis plants a new seed and the process flowers again, and again.

If the sounding space is saturated in *Thallein* it is essentially shattered in **O-Mega**, the brief, percussive appendix to Xenakis’s oeuvre. The scoring is not unusual for Xenakis, but it seems more open, more outward looking than his earlier music. The music might seem more permeable, but hasn’t the openness that always attends the unknown always been there?

So how are we to make sense of it all, this unknown, enormous, and often alarming world of Iannis Xenakis? What is our place here? I imagine now that it is this vastness of possibility that led me to want concrete and practical input from Xenakis when I played for him. The simple answer, the “reading,” I was after in my sessions with Xenakis continues to elude. But in the end what is there instead is so much more: his mystery, the fearlessness of his invention, and a baptism by noise and power that awaits every listener.

—Notes by Steven Schick