

This text was written in 2001, in the weeks following Iannis Xenakis' passing away. It was published, in print, in the Open Space journal (spring 2001). I am making it available today (March 2022) when many are going to celebrate and honour Xenakis' centenary, in different ways, in several sites worldwide. I am making it available today also because it resonates, however surprisingly and obliquely, with the current war events taking place (once again) in eastern Europe.

*'...composer est une bataille...' – pour la paix.*

### *Paragraphs on Xenakis*

Agostino Di Scipio

I shall not say, like Aristotle, that the mean path is the best, for in music – as in politics – the middle means compromise. Rather lucidity and harshness of critical thought – in other words, action, reflection, and self-transformation by the sounds themselves – is the path to follow.

(Xenakis, *Vers une métamusique*, 1967; English trans. *Formalized Music*, 1992, p.181)

“Xenakis is dead – February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2001”.

The news came over the electronic mail, sent by a Greek-French friend, Makis Solomos. But it came not unexpected, as Makis himself had kept me informed of the degrading state of Xenakis's health over the last months. The final moment was approaching with the very character of a matter-of-fact event, prior to its actual taking place, ineluctable in its imminence – something that appeared meaningless even to wish to postpone or shift into the future. I occasionally turned my mind to something like a ‘sense’ in this imminent leave-taking, and to figure out the artistic, intellectual and moral heritage Xenakis left to those willing to establish some fertile relationship to his work.

But questions of heritage are always difficult, especially when asked about personalities as strong and multifaceted as Xenakis. In the following, I can barely try to provide (for myself, in the first place) a few annotations possibly of use in approaching, from afar, questions of intellectual heritage. For, who am I to raise these questions? And what images in Xenakis's life and work gain *momentum* in my present situation, now that he's left and we're left with the questions of what he left us with?

I was born in 1962 (May 29<sup>th</sup>, same day as Xenakis, if we are to believe the biographical data supplied by several authors, which remain anyway uncertain because of the loss of official records in wartime Greece). In 1962 Xenakis was 40, or 41. This, too, is uncertain – if anything, we know he was in the middle of the way of his lifetime. By that time, he had composed outstanding, ground-breaking works.



Also, he had already gone through the guerrilla actions of the Greek leftist resistance against the English (and later American) protectorate, and then moved first, and only very briefly, to Italy (a former invader of Greece during the Fascist years, then itself the object of a continuing but hidden form of U.S. protectorate) and finally to France (wherewith Xenakis planned to sail for the U.S., to no success though). By 1962, he had already joined (and quit) architect Le Corbusier's studio and Pierre Schaeffer's GRM, and had passed through many other adventures and collaborations (including classes with Olivier Messiaen, collaboration with Hermann Scherchen's *Gravesaner Blätter*, and the initial sketches of what eventually became his most famous book, *Musiques Formelles*).

Some collaborations, it must be noted, had concluded due to his pronounced intellectual autonomy from his Paris 'tutors': he heavily criticized Le Corbusier's images for the 1958 Philips Pavillion in Bruxelles, and later had *querelles* with Schaeffer, especially at the time of the making of *Analogique A/B* (1958-59). He left the GRM after composing the tape music titled *Bohor*, in 1962.<sup>1</sup>

As a background to these events, was his polemical stance against the then prevalent serial approach to composition. His paper *The crisis of serial music* dates from 1955.

Now, as I said, all this had already happened before I was born in Southern Italy (called Magna Graecia in Latin), and more precisely in Naples (the Greek Neapolis, i.e. 'new city', also known as Parthenope after the name of a mythical Siren, meaning a virgin, fertile girl, a potential bearer of life).

The first time I ever listened to Xenakis's music was probably as late as 1984 (so he was in his 60's). It must have been a recording of *Metastaseis*, or perhaps *Nomos alpha*, I can't say now.

The first time I listened to his electroacoustic music was probably in 1987 or 1988. It was possibly a more crucial listening for me as a composer, one of a much younger generation than Xenakis. At a concert in Montreal, in 1991, I listened to the powerful computer-generated *Gendy301* (later published with the title *Gendy3*). In 1994, a companion tape piece followed that I loved in all its peculiar strangeness, the shorter and somewhat 'trembling' *S.709* (the Italian première of which I eventually curated, on the occasion of an intermedia event called *Tetractys*, in L'Aquila, 1996). To my ears – the ears of a musician then around 30, who in his teenage years used to scratch a customized solid body electric guitar – the man behind those pieces was quite *young* indeed. This music had a lot of noise in it, a clangorous sonority of battle and fighting, the texture and impact of natural phenomena that are random, ineluctable and overwhelming. It demanded that the listener take a clear position concerning the nature and meaning of artifacts such as 'music' and 'sound', however different from the composer's own position.

This *pathos*, or passionate participation, peculiar to the sound world of Xenakis's music, sometimes is described with a world image of wild and furiously

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<sup>1</sup> According to François Delalande (*Il faut être constamment un immigré. Entretiens avec Xenakis*, Buchet-Chastel, 1997, p.159), the word Bohor is the name of a character in the Lancelot saga, also called 'Bohort l'Exilé' (Bohort the exiled).

hostile natural forces, as depicted in Lucretius *De rerum natura* (with overtones of Epicurus' and Democritus' atomistic draft of the world). But this *pathos* was also very clearly contrasted by an equally strong theoretical and formalized attitude, a 'colder' and detached insight into the mathematical details of the musical construction reflecting the eye (or ear) of an external demiurge, or architect. To my ear, the latter element, one of 'abstraction', created a powerful and intense dialectic clashing with the energetic impact of the sound matter itself.

That dialectic – a trace of Heraclitean *pòlemos* at the very heart of this music – is crucial in Xenakis's entire instrumental-vocal *oeuvre*, from *Metastaseis* (1953-54), *Pithoprakta* (1955-56) and *Eonta* (1964), to *Nuits* (1967-68), *N'Shima* (1975) and *Palimpsest* (1979), down to the works from the 1990's (e.g. *Ittidra*, 1996). Yet, today it seems to me especially audible in his electroacoustic music, from *Diamorphoses* (1957) and *Concret PH* (1958) to *Hibiki Hana Ma* (1970), *La Légend d'Eer* (1977), *Pour la paix* (a kind of *hörspiel*, from 1981) and *Gendy301*.<sup>2</sup> I think it must be this fundamental inner dialectic that brings about the overall impression of a problematic and unreconciled sound art created by a *young* person, or perhaps a true 'youngster' – anyway, someone who cannot firmly rely on the past when facing the present, and who can hardly stand waiting for the future.

This young man was, again and in a more essential way, a 'stranger' – as even his family name seemed to recall, with its ring of *xenos*, of 'foreigner'. A young which is also an immigrant and an exiled. (Only later I read of the death sentence put on him during the armed resistance in Greece).

Today, in retrospect, I clarify my impressions with images of *youth* and *pòlemos*. These also resonate from a number of events, maybe biographically marginal, but telling. Two examples. During the May 1968 events, in Paris, activist music students wrote on the Conservatory walls: "Xenakis, pas Gounod!" (stop with Gounod, we want Xenakis). In Summer 2000, the sonic 'dust' of *Concret PH* was picked up by a number of 'laptop DJs' (a new generation of music youngsters) as the only sound material they re-mixed and heavily processed in their late night performances at the 'off-festival' running in parallel to the International Computer Music Conference, in Berlin.

Other such examples could be recalled. The only time I shook hands with Xenakis, he was surrounded by young listeners, musicians and not musicians, who had just attended a concert of his music.

Now, already in partial and admittedly very personal memories and annotations such as all of the above, I seem to catch a glimpse of a possibly transpersonal view of the kind appropriate to circumscribe the compelling questions of Xenakis's heritage. I refer to (1) a healthy, vital and never really resolved 'confusion' of the quantitative and the qualitative, of the algorithmic and the experiential, of the conceptual and the perceptual – reflecting a more fundamental struggle (or maybe encounter?) between the rational and the sensuous, the mind and

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<sup>2</sup> Analytical sketches of some of these tape works are found in my paper "Compositional models in Xenakis's electroacoustic music", *Perspectives of New Music*, 36 (2), 1998.

the body; and (2) a today much needed 'ethics of the immigrant', of the uprooted<sup>3</sup> – something of the utmost relevance in these years, in Europe and elsewhere.

(In passing, I'd like to say that a very similar view can be observed in the life and work of another protagonist of the second half of the history of Western music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Herbert Brün, who died last year at 82. Himself an intellectual and musical *wanderer*, and a brilliant polemicist and a proponent of critical thinking, Brün had left first Jerusalem for Europe in his youth, then he left Europe for the U.S., in the early 1960's. During the last years, in Urbana, he was always surrounded by much younger people, including composers and performers.)<sup>4</sup>

The clash of number and sound, of abstraction and sensuous perception, is what allows for the encounter of *theoria* and *empireia*. This 'collision that binds', and the existential situation of the uprooted foreigner, testify to an element of *tragedy* – to which I want to briefly turn now.

I'm not assigning any strictly representational attribute to the word 'tragedy', I'm not referring to any form of theatre or literature, nor to the Greek roots of the term. I am rather referring to the 'tragical' as an essential element of human existence. In simple words, 'tragedy' is when we come to perceive that which *is*, that which comes into presence before it leaves, as a soon-to-vanish presence. It is, too, the perception of something present that makes us sense, in its difference, a hitherto unrealized lack of knowledge that leaves us uprooted and stranger to the 'here and now'. Maybe a kind of *breakdown*, but an existential and even ontological one.<sup>5</sup>

A nourishing element of life – we feel what *is* present, and, at the same time, feel compelled to find a way to it, however strange or different it may be. But this is something often annihilated by a notion that the present is problematic and somehow incomplete, and that technical solutions exist to cope with that. Yet, the best technical solutions only and always belong to the future: we have a tendency to project or even 'outsource' ourselves into the future, to eradicate us from what *is*, eventually feeling relieved from the (unsatisfying, difficult, tiresome) present. Don't think about it, it's going to be solved.

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<sup>3</sup> Xenakis comments on this in passages of Delalande (1997).

<sup>4</sup> I wrote *wanderer* only to evoke Brün's Jewish-German origins, without romantic connotations. The word has a ring of Luigi Nono's *caminantes* in it. It provides a faithful translation of the Greek *kéleütha* (wayfarer), referring to the title of a Xenakis' book, *Kéleütha* (L'Arche Publ., 1994), meaning 'ways', 'paths'. I wish someone one day may consider Xenakis and Brün, who were friends, as contemporary incarnations of an ancient, historical and philosophical antagonism at the roots of Western civilisation, between Athens and Jerusalem, between Greek and Jew worldviews – an early Mediterranean dualism resonating in the Eastern sources of the West. An important tape work of Xenakis' bears the title *Orient / Occident* (1960).

<sup>5</sup> One is reminded of Nono's musical poetics in his opera *Prometheus*, bearing the subtitle 'the tragedy of listening' – meaning a 'listening-still' in the absence of known cues and frames for 'lending our ear' to what comes to us in the medium of sound. Interestingly, but in an entirely different context, the U.S. composer Michael Hamman describes one of the task of composing, and not a secondary one, as the 'engineering of a breakdown'. To accomplish that, he usually works with computer technology. Thus, the task is accomplished with the very means by which breakdowns are normally prevented. This adds a sense of 'critical view of technology' to the activity itself of music composing today.

A diminished, minimalist form of the 'tragic' is when our projection into the future – following from the imperative that economic advances be capable of overcoming today's difficulties, and from the predominant utopian ideology of quantitative knowledge and the marketplace, presumed to make life on earth milder – proves of little help in the face of that ultimate presence whose nearness and being-here cannot be *explained*. (This word also means 'flattened', put down on the floor.) The more we abstract ourselves into the future, the more our present and presence weaken and impoverish. The present is made absent by that very projection into the future which is, however, essential to technology.

Commonly understood, 'technology' is the operative representation of know-how that provides ways to efficient 'problem-solving'. As a side-effect, it also weakens our perception of the present, because it is always the case that more efficient technical solutions belong to the future. (This instills the popular notion of 'progress', as well as the common sense that progress is 'necessary'). By removing the present, technology minimizes the experience of the tragic, and keeps it to nil. (Hence the noun 'nihilism'.)

An attitude of 'problem-raising' – perhaps a different notion of technology, a 'heretical' one – is instead characteristic of all art making, of 'composing'. It demands a stronger perception of, and an emphasis on, the present. Therefore, it fosters a perception of the tragic.

But the present is uneasy, uneven, too. It features a lot of contradictions. The clash of *theoria* and *empireia* also witnesses an attempt to preserve and deal with present contradictions, as an alternative to turning them into conflicts to solve. Turning contradictions into conflicts is a way to deny differences. (This is Brün's observation.) It's the same as problem-solving, in that it reflects an imperative that differences be negated as such and reconciled to unity. Problem overcome, end of conflict, endgame.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, Xenakis says, and makes it musically audible, that "the difference is a proof of existence, of knowledge, of participation in the things of the world".<sup>7</sup>

What is relevant here, for me, is a *pòlemos* that generates a difference.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> All technology provides an attempt to re-generate a more fundamental unity or harmony felt as 'originary' (i.e. belonging to the origins, to the sources). This is because 'harmony' (meaning an intimate unity and balance of human existence and nature, *fusis* – be it 'earth' or 'cosm') is anyway lost. Proof is that technology exists.

<sup>7</sup> Makis Solomos, *Xenakis*, P.O.Editions, 1996, p.107. See also Balint Varga, *Conversations with Iannis Xenakis*, Faber & Faber, 1996, p.50.

<sup>8</sup> This echoes the interpretation of the Heraclitus' *pòlemos* (Heraclitus fragment n.53) provided by Jacques Derrida's in his reading of Martin Heidegger (*La mano di Heidegger*, Laterza, 1991). Heraclitus says: *Pòlemos panton patèr esti, panton de basilèus, kai tous men theòus èdeixe tous de anthropous; tous men doulous epòiese*. Derrida's Heidegger translates: "battle is the generator of everything, the guardian of all things; of something, it proves they are Gods, of other things it proves they are humans; it generates some as slaves, some others as free men" (Derrida, 1991, p.150). I am not able to confront the concepts contained in such lines – it's hard for all of us to understand, let alone accept, what is meant with 'Gods', 'free men' and 'slaves'. What is relevant, however, is that Derrida refers the *pòlemos* to an ontological scenario *not* an anthropological one (i.e. a scenario 'before' the human being becomes conscious of itself as present rather than absent, as being rather than not-being). In anthropological

It's not that life *should* be a battle (that would be war ideology...), but that life is brought about by an essential struggle: being born (and bearing) is a struggle that brings to life. Generating *as* being generated. According to Xenakis, "composing is a struggle".<sup>9</sup> Which is to say that composing is a kind of bringing to life, the presencing of something previously nonexistent, whose presence is revealed by its difference.

This implies a view that human existence is primarily a question of perceiving and holding the different *as* different, such that a richer and broader situation is offered at any time, *in the present*, a chance for us to hold the unheard-of, the unknown – i.e. to 'welcome the stranger'. (I think this has to do with Xenakis's quest for 'originality', too.) The 'holding of the different' is *philein* – i.e. love or friendship, a sense of sharing a common existential situation. Thus *pòlemos*, the 'originator of all differences', is a prerequisite of *philia*, and an attribute of peace.<sup>10</sup>

(This is the same dialectic as the 'collision that binds' mentioned above.)

"Opposition is true friendship".

(William Blake wrote these words in his manuscript copy of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.)

The necessary is only briefly unveiled when we feel as present and near that for which, albeit problematic and controversial, life is worth living. Xenakis succeeds in precisely providing an image for, and a powerful auditory experience of, this state of affairs. In short, what he fundamentally does is to call our attention to the fact that *one does not die if he hasn't lived* – which is *no* platitude.

At the beginning of my annotations, I mentioned a kind of ineluctability in the approaching of death, a sense of little surprise about Xenakis's leave. How could it be different?

Indeed, having had so much of the tragical proper to the human existence (the cognition and experience of the present and the different), and having matched, too, all that 'sound and fury' against the grids of a theoretical rationality leading into abstraction and formalization, Xenakis in a sense could not but die. Which means:

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terms, the Heraclitus fragments reads: "War is the father of everything". For Derrida-Heidegger, instead, *patèr* is understood simply as 'generator', as 'bearer of life' (hence originator of the difference of 'being' and 'not-being'), rather than with the familiar figure of the 'father' – just as *basileus* is understood as 'guardian', 'care-keeper', rather than 'king'. In short, this is a de-anthropologized reading, which seems quite appropriate, as in fact at the time of Heraclitus (5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), no *philo-sophia* existed as such, i.e. in the anthropological sense of 'man's quest for knowledge and wisdom'. We usually refer to it as a pre-Socratic form of thinking. A similar de-anthropologizing seems to resonate in Xenakis when he refers to another pre-Socratic, Parmenides (who, anyway, met young Socrates). Of main relevance to Xenakis was Parmenides' *Poem*, quoted many times in *Formalized Music*.

<sup>9</sup> Same references as in footnote 5.

<sup>10</sup> It may be significant that the text spoken by the choir of *Pour la Paix* describes war events. One voice, however, is dubious about that, as she asks: "What peace? Anyway this wasn't a real war, so this isn't a real peace" (p.12 of the draft Salabert score, 1994). In the final, another voice says: "The grenade exploded just above them. And they had time to think, one that it was good that that happened, another that no" (p.14).

"...composer est une bataille..."

he died not 'tired of life' but 'satisfied with life', having drunk of it to a point of satisfaction. There lies the only meaning of the fact that, 'after all' and 'by now', he *was* an elder at 'that' point. Youths, as the tune goes, can't get no satisfaction – not yet (but still try and try, trying to get reasons to live and get old).

In short, it's a question of finally *meeting with death* rather than *being found by it*. Exhausting one's own life *vs.* being deprived of it.

So, if life was *left*, on February 4<sup>th</sup>, that happened because it had been *reached* in the first place. And death was *reached* as well. Xenakis *could* leave. Others could, and we all hope to be able to. Like Varèse could, to mention a name of another 'immigrant'. But today this particular way of 'thinking life and death' is what we are left with by Xenakis, together with his music and his writings. It is necessary, one of these days, to see how this thinking ties with many other learnings we draw from these traces left.

"Xenakis is dead". Today these words signify a difference.

L'Aquila, February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001