Meta-Xenakis

New Perspectives on Iannis Xenakis's Life, Work, and Legacies

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Cover image: Iannis Xenakis at the C.R. MacIntosh Museum, Glasgow, Scotland, 1987. Photo by Henning Lohner, courtesy of CIX Archives, Lohner collection.

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1. Iannis Xenakis's Theater Studies: An Unknown Aspect of the Composer's Life during the Occupation

Nikos Ioakeim

> My hardened conscience—nourished either by the flames of the Greek Resistance (which was betrayed from its conception and over the years by the Soviets, the Allies, and the Greek themselves) or by the desperate efforts of my music—alone, may guide me towards light or towards death.
>
> (Iannis Xenakis, 14 December 1971)[1]

Iannis Xenakis's music for the theater occupies a small, albeit very important part of his oeuvre: it consists of music for the staging of Aeschylus's *The Suppliants* (1964), Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (1966), Seneca's *Medea* (1967), Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus* (1975)—which unfortunately fell through but led to the autonomous piece *À Colone*,[2] Euripides's *Helen* (1977), and Euripides's *The Bacchae* (1993). Although Xenakis entered the theatrical field after a commission by the stage director Alexis Solomos (1918–2012) and the National Theater of Greece in 1964 and not on his own initiative, he followed a highly individual course that bore the landmarks of his lifelong interests: he worked solely on stagings of Greco-Roman tragedies; he opted for bilingual stagings, where he set the text to music in the original while the play was delivered in the language of the audience (with the exception of *The Suppliants* and *Oresteia*—although the latter was actually Ancient Greek text set to music, but during the staging it was sung in English); he composed incidental music for the theater, yet afterwards turned it into self-contained concert works in the form of choral-instrumental suites or unaccompanied choral pieces (while the original music was never revived), i.e., *Hiketides-Les Suppliants d'Eschyle* (1964), *Medea Senecae* (1967), *Oresteia* (1967), *À Colone* (1977), *À Hélène* (1977). His last theatrical feat, *Les Bacchantes d'Euripide*, was exceptionally not turned into a suite but was published in its original

1 Open letter by Xenakis to *Le Monde*, in Xenakis, 2008, p. 223–4.
2 See Ιωακείμ [Ioakeim], 2018, p. 112–13.

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form. Furthermore, Xenakis composed another two separate works, *Kassandra* (1987) and *La Déesse Athéna* (1992), again settings of scenes from Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, which were inserted into his *Oresteia* suite. Especially concerning *Oresteia*, the fact that it was the sole work in his oeuvre that he revisited and reconsidered during his lifetime clearly shows that it played a pivotal role in his thought and artistic development.[3] This chapter investigates Xenakis's early and formative experiences of the theater in Athens during the Axis Occupation revealing the critical and recently discovered connection between Xenakis and the culturally important figure of Vassilis Rotas (1889–1977).

In later life, Xenakis made only scarce references to his theater experiences during his youth in Greece. He mentioned that he had participated in the staging of Attic and Shakespearean tragedies during his adolescent years at the Anargyrios and Korgialenios School of Spetses, but that he had never watched a professional staging of an ancient tragedy before leaving Greece in 1947 (although he had visited the Ancient Theater of Epidaurus in 1937 or 1938).[4] In 1981, he told François Delalande:

> I remember, I was maybe 20 years old, I was taking some classes, and I was asked to direct a tragedy by Aeschylus–I do not remember which one–and I imagined the whole staging with lights, not at all a classic staging. I don't think I had ever seen Aeschylus performed in the theater–it was based solely on the text. And I made a staging that consisted of lighting, lighting changes. And that was quite unexpected. It was the first time I became aware of the importance of visual phenomena as visual music.[5]

This singular remark about Xenakis actually having taken theater classes is confirmed by his biographer Nouritza Matossian, who also mentions that it was Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* that he was asked to direct, but until recently there was no other evidence about this.[6] In 2017, a Greek journalist, a friend of Xenakis during the Nazi Occupation (1941–4), published her memoirs where she confirms that they were fellow students at the Theatriko Spoudastirio (Theater Studio), a drama school that operated between

3 Next to Xenakis's work for the theater, the piece *Polla ta Dhina* (1962) for children's chorus and orchestra must also be mentioned, which, although a concert work, sets to music a stasimon from Sophocles's *Antigone*; it was conceived before the composer launched into writing incidental music, and shows his early predilection for the ancient drama.

4 See Xenakis's 28 May 1964 letter to the stage director Alexis Solomos regarding the staging of Aeschylus's *The Suppliants* with his music in the Theater of Epidaurus—Xenakis Archives, OM 11-2, ms. p. 3. N.B. that the theater hosted the staging of an ancient tragedy for the first time since Greek Antiquity in 1938, again in 1954, and it established itself as part of the Athens-Epidaurus Festival for the annual staging of ancient drama during the summer season in 1955.

5 Delalande, 1997, p. 111 [*Je me souviens, j'avais peut-être 20 ans, je suivais certains cours et on m'avait demandé de faire une mise en scène d'une tragédie d'Eschyle—je ne sais plus laquelle—et j'avais imaginé tout une mise en scène avec des lumières, pas du tout une mise en scène classique. Je crois que je n'avais jamais vu Eschyle joué au théâtre—c'était seulement d'après le texte. Et j'avais fait une mise en scène qui était faite de lumières, de changements de lumières. Et c'est tout à fait inattendu. C'était la première prise de conscience de l'importance des phénomènes visuels en tant que musique visuelle*].

6 Matossian, 2005, p. 259. Cf. Μάκης Σολωμός [Makis Solomos], 1996, p. 59. In Xenakis, 1996, p. 51, the composer mentions again that as a young man he directed a tragedy by Aeschylus (without naming which)—although, confusingly, not referring to his theater studies in Athens but to his secondary school years at Spetses.

1942–4 in Athens. The journalist recalls that the young Xenakis was one day asked to submit a paper on the scene of Cassandra from *Agamemnon* for the dramaturgy class, which he did, writing down in detail how the scene would be set according to the verses. Their teacher, the poetess Sofia Mavroidi-Papadaki (1898–1977), was impressed by the originality of his conception and requested his bibliography, causing Xenakis to admit that he had merely thought of it all by himself.[7]

It is well-known that Xenakis's youth was "kneaded" (his word) through his studies of Ancient Greek literature.[8] When setting Aeschylus's *Oresteia* to music in 1966, the composer mentioned that he studied the trilogy for the first time during the Occupation years, and that it "caused me a shock."[9] The fact that he delivered his paper on Cassandra's scene back then matches with the fact that in 1987 he set it to music as well with his work *Kassandra*; it is clearly characteristic of the man to bring into fruition decades later concepts that he visited during his youth.

The Theatriko Spoudastirio was founded by the philologist, writer, playwright, and translator Vassilis Rotas. Rotas was a remarkable figure of the Greek twentieth century: in addition to classical philology, he studied acting in his twenties at the Athens Conservatory, which hosted the only drama school in Greece at the time. Then he served in the army for nearly twenty years, and in 1927 he retired at the rank of colonel for political reasons. From then on, he devoted himself to the theater, penning and staging plays, and trying to retain a drama school, while making a living as a theater critic and translator.[10] Together with his companion, the writer Voula Damianakou (1922–2016), and after nearly fifty years of intermittent work, he managed to translate into Modern Greek the complete oeuvre of William Shakespeare (both his plays and poems)—an amazing feat which was completed in 1974 and remains exemplary, of analogous importance to the translations of August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845) in German, and of Boris Pasternak (1890–1960) in Russian.[11]

Rotas was a founding member of the National Liberation Front (EAM) during the Occupation, together with two renowned Marxist literary figures, friends of his since their student years, Kostas Varnalis (1884–1974) and Markos Avgeris (1884–1973), and he had also composed the hymn of EAM.[12] Although becoming a member of the United Democratic Left (EDA) after its founding in 1951, during the 1960s Rotas was

7 Σώκου [Sokou], 2017, vol. 1, p. 258–9.

8 Bois, 1966, p. 18 [*Ma jeunesse a été pétrie de ça*].

9 See his letter of acceptance of the commission of *Oresteia* to the Ypsilanti festival's director Clara Godwin Owens on 19 December 1965: Xenakis Archives, OM 13-5-2. Thirty years later, in 1995, in an interview following a choreographed performance of his *Oresteia* in the Theater of Epidaurus, Xenakis came back to it (Xirou, 2010, at 58:23): "I had studied the *Oresteia* thoroughly when I was young, 18 years old."

10 Before founding the Theatriko Spoudastirio, Rotas had run the Laïko Theatro Athinon (Athens Theater of the People) between 1930–7.

11 Damianakou's birth year is often erroneously cited as being 1914. For Rotas's biography, see Ρώτας [Rotas], 1980, p. 8–13 and Ρώτας [Rotas], 1981, p. 7–10.

12 "Λευτεριά, πανώρια κόρη" (Liberty, Fair Maiden), words and music by V. Rotas—see Ρώτας [Rotas], 1981, p. 79 and Ρώτας [Rotas], 1982, p. 27–31, including a reprint of the score.

in constant dispute with EDA, accusing it of bureaucratic rule, democratic deficit, and dependence on the word of the Greek Communist Party (KKE) which had been outlawed in 1947, the year Xenakis fled Greece.[13] After the establishment of the military Junta in 1967, Rotas, although an elderly man, was exiled along with many others to the unpopulated island of Gyaros.[14] Until the end of his life, he, like Xenakis, remained faithful to the ideals and actions of EAM.

The Theatriko Spoudastirio was founded in early 1942 and functioned regardless of many difficulties until early 1944; by then, the United Panhellenic Organization of Youth (EPON), i.e., the youth of EAM, was gradually going underground since their Resistance activities against the Axis forces were becoming more and more critical. Rotas decided to move to the mountains, to the so-called "Free Greece" that was ruled by EAM, and there continued his theatrical activities until the liberation of Greece at the end of 1944, when he returned to Athens. In 1946 the Theatriko Spoudastirio managed to resume its activities with renewed staff until 1948.[15]

Prominent figures of Greek cultural life taught in Rotas's school during the Occupation: Rotas himself and Markos Avgeris taught creative writing and Greek literature, Sophia Mavroidi-Papadaki taught dramaturgy-dramatics, Yannis Tsarouchis (1910–89) taught scenography-history of art, stage director Giannoulis Sarantidis (1902–48) taught acting, Antonis Fokas (1889–1986) taught costume design, Thanassis Apartis (1899–1972) and Memos Makris (1913–93) taught drawing and sculpture, Simon Karas (1905–99) taught Greek traditional ("Demotic") and church ("Byzantine") music, and Miranda Voulgari-Filiakou (1921–2015) taught dance.[16]

The Theatriko Spoudastirio published its own student weekly and organized various cultural events such as theatrical performances, concerts, lectures, and parties.[17] It evidently functioned as a Resistance meeting point undercover, since it hosted hundreds of members of EPON: around five hundred students were enrolled in the school at its peak, including the painter and scenographer Nikos Georgiadis (1923–2001), Xenakis, as well as the film director Manos Zacharias (b. 1922), who was the chair of the student committee of the school, and was to become the political leader of the "Lord Byron Battalion" of the Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS)

13 For an exhaustive account of his dispute with EDA, see Ρώτας-Δαμιανάκου [Rotas-Damianakou], 1961 and Ρώτας-Δαμιανάκου [Rotas-Damianakou], 1965.

14 For a chronicle of Rotas's exile, see his letters and diary entries in Ρώτας [Rotas], 1980, p. 44–71.

15 Ρώτας [Rotas], 1981, p. 24.

16 Note that Tsarouchis was also the teacher of Xenakis's youngest brother, the painter and architect Cosmas Xenakis (1925–1984). Interestingly, the Greek term for costume designer, *ενδυματολόγος* ("endymatologos") was invented in the early 1930s after the founding of the National Theater of Greece, especially for Antonis Fokas, due to lack of terminology, since there was no such tradition in professional theater in Modern Greece (the Aristotelian term *σκευοποιός* ("skeuopoios") probably didn't seem suitable, as it is exclusively relevant to the Attic tragedy)—see Antonis Fokas's testimony in *Φωτόπουλος* [Fotopoulos], 1990, p. 258–9. N.B. that even the role of the stage director was not yet recognized in Greek theatrical practice at the time. The Theatriko Spoudastirio was, in fact, hosted at the music school of Simon Karas, at 26 Lekka Street. See further Ρώτας [Rotas], 1981, p. 16.

17 Find reprints of material from the weekly in Ρώτας [Rotas], 1982, p. 38–59.

during the *Dekemvriana* in December 1944, where Xenakis served as an officer and was wounded on 1 January 1945.[18]

Rotas, in his fifties at the time, functioned as a role model and a symbol for the members of EPON; his 1943 lecture on traditional Greek song was packed.[19] Xenakis probably attended classes irregularly, given his studies at the Polytechnic and his participation in the Resistance—Rotas's focus, however, on discovering and preserving tradition as a source of inspiration and self-consciousness for the present certainly resounded in the young Xenakis: let's consider not only his early forays in composition up to *Metastasis*, but also the principles on which his later work developed, plus his constant urge to the Greeks after his return to Greece for the first time in 1974 to be aware of their traditions and to research them.[20]

On 24 September 1943 the "manifesto" of the Theatriko Spoudastirio was published, signed by Rotas, describing the objectives of the school and the kind of theatrical practice he dreamt of and tried to set in motion. The following statements sound very Xenakian:

> The artist [. . .] must [. . .] be apprenticed in all genres transmitted to us by the exuberant current of tradition and be scientifically qualified to acquire an all-embracing artistic perspective and experience, in order to be able to solve problems and apply living theories with the power of his cultivated talent. [. . .] The lust [of his imagination] must learn to run and fly according to laws drawn from scientific experience. The ancient Greek tradition (which in many ways has survived in our traditional folk art), the global artistic production, and the social demands of our people; these must be the contributors to such a creation. [. . .] Therefore, not only actors, but also stage directors and set designers and dancers and even composers and playwrights, must be scientifically educated. [. . .] We look to the masses, which is why our theater can only be a theater of the people. The theater of the people must offer the Greek people a 'festivity', i.e. it must be an all-embracing theater that meets their artistic and social demands.[21]

18 Σώκου [Sokou], 2017, vol. 1, p. 223. Manos Zacharias is mentioned in Ρώτας [Rotas], 1981, p. 24 and Ρώτας [Rotas], 1982, p. 37.

19 For an account of the event, see Ρώτας [Rotas], 1981, p. 16–17, 75 and Ρώτας [Rotas], 1982, p. 1. For the text of the lecture, see Ρώτας, "Το Δημοτικό τραγούδι" [Rotas, "The Demotic Song"] in Ρώτας [Rotas], 1982, p. 60–8, and in Ρώτας [Rotas], 1986, p. 266–76.

20 See especially Rotas's 13 August 1943 essay "Το ελληνικό ήθος" (The Greek Ethos) in Ρώτας [Rotas], 1986, p. 221–5. See also on p. 211–14 his 17 September 1943 essay "Ελληνικό πνεύμα" (Greek Spirit) where he reproduces and affirms relevant ideas of the writer, politician, Greek Communist Party member, and author of the ideological manifesto of EAM, Dimitris Glinos (1882–1943). For Xenakis's thoughts about tradition, see Παγκουρέλης [Pangourelis], 1977.

21 Ρώτας [Rotas], 1986, p. 263–64 [*Ο καλλιτέχνης* [...] *οφείλει* [...] *να μαθητέψει σε όλα τα είδη που μας φέρνει το πληθωρικό ρεύμα της παράδοσης και να καταρτιστεί επιστημονικά για ν' αποχτήσει καθολική γνώμη κι εμπειρία της τέχνης, για να μπορέσει με τη δύναμη του καλλιεργημένου ταλάντου του να λύσει προβλήματα και να εφαρμόσει ζωντανές θεωρίες.* [...] *Κι ο πόθος αυτός [της φαντασίας του] πρέπει νάχει μάθει να τρέχει και να πετάει με νόμους βγαλμένους από την επιστημονικήν εμπειρία. Η αρχαία ελληνική παράδοση που σε πολλά έχει επιβιώσει στη νεώτερη λαϊκή μας τέχνη, η παράδοση από την παγκόσμια παραγωγή και το κοινωνικό αίτημα του λαού μας, αυτά πρέπει να σταθούνε οι συντελεστές για μια τέτοια δημιουργία.* [...] *Πρέπει λοιπόν να μορφωθούνε επιστημονικά όχι μόνον υποκριτές, παρά και σκηνοθέτες και σκηνογράφοι και χορευτές και μάλιστα οι μουσουργοί και οι δραματικοί ποιητές.* [...] *Κι εμείς αποβλέπουμε στον*

What is remarkable in these excerpts is Rotas's insistence that the artist acquires *scientific knowledge*—not in the sense of academic education, but as an in-depth training that excludes amateurism—as well as the broadest possible perspective. What is also striking is the use of the term "all-embracing theater;" it brings to mind "total theater"/"total spectacle," which is how Xenakis characterized the ancient drama already in 1967, while contemplating on his work thus far on Aeschylus's *The Suppliants*, Seneca's *Medea* and Aeschylus's *Oresteia*.[22] The composer came back to it in 1991 with his essay "Aeschylus, A Total Theater," where he reviewed his settings of words to music and discussed his predilection for Aeschylean tragedy.[23] Of course by the notion of "total theater," Xenakis referred to the synthesis of all arts that the ancient drama requires and displays, while by his "all-embracing theater," Rotas meant something more general and "leftist" (in accordance with the spirit of the times): a theatrical practice which concerns and is relevant to everybody.

The elective affinities of the two men do not end there: starting from the 1940s, Rotas reviewed theater performances, with a special focus on the ancient drama. In his reviews he constantly criticized the approach of the National Theater of Greece, maintaining that ancient tragedy should only be presented in ancient theaters, with the actors wearing *cothurnuses* (i.e., high, thick-soled buskins meant to make them look taller) and masks, and using a particular type of speaking, acting, and moving that suited the open-air dimensions of the spectacle. In other words, he demanded specialized research into the matter, and a quasi-ritualistic approach instead of the rather realistic one that was in fashion at the time.[24]

Such ideas from Rotas coincide perfectly with the objectives stated by Xenakis to the press whenever he came to Athens to work on the staging of a tragedy—in particular, Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus* in 1975 and Euripides's *Helen* in 1977. In fact, during an interview the day before *Helen*'s première, Xenakis stated that his "secret desire" was to work on a tragedy in an all-embracing manner, both in terms of music and stage direction, "but there is much time and studying needed for something like that." Such a work could be realized by a group that should follow a fixed style in acting, staging, and voice-training "so that authentic performances be created, and perhaps, after two or three generations, the foundations of a high-standard art will have been laid."[25] This

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πολύν ελληνικό λαό, γι' αυτό και το θεατρό μας δεν μπορεί να είνε άλλο από λαϊκό θέατρο. Το λαϊκό θέατρο πρέπει να προσφέρει στον ελληνικό λαό 'γιορτή', δηλαδή καθολικό θέατρο, που ν' ανταποκρίνεται στο καλλιτεχνικό και κοινωνικό αίτημά του].

22 "Notice sur l'Orestie" in Xenakis, 1967.

23 "Eschyle, un théâtre total" in Xenakis, 1996, p. 49–58.

24 See especially his essays dating from 1943 to 1951: "Η Αναγέννηση της τραγωδίας" (The Rebirth of Tragedy), "Η γέννηση της τραγωδίας" (The Birth of Tragedy), "Έχει προγόνους η τραγωδία;" (Does Tragedy Have Ancestors?), "Η τραγωδία και οι παραστάσεις των αρχαίων δραμάτων" (The Tragedy and the Staging of Ancient Dramas) in Ρώτας [Rotas], 1986, p. 474–519.

25 Παγκουρέλης [Pangourelis], 1977 [*[...] ό 'κρυφός πόθος' του [...] εἶναι νά δουλέψει ὁλοκληρωμένα μιά τραγωδία, καί σάν μουσική καί σάν σκηνοθεσία, 'ἀλλά χρειάζεται πολύς χρόνος καί μελέτη γιά κάτι τέτοιο'. Μιά τέτοια δουλειά, θά μποροῦσε νά γίνει [...] ἀπό μιά ὁμάδα, πού θά ἀκολουθήσει ἕνα ὁρισμένο ὕφος στην ὑποκριτική, τή σκηνοθεσία, τή φωνητική "ὥστε νά*

was the sole instance where Xenakis revealed his intention to assume the role of stage director as well. Unfortunately, the composer never received a commission to work on an ancient tragedy in Greece again, and this idea was never set in action.

The point, however, where Xenakis's ideas deviate from Rotas's concerns language itself: Rotas considered it self-evident that the tragedies would be played translated into Modern Greek, while Xenakis, ever since his *Oresteia* in 1966, insisted on setting the text to music in the original. In accordance with the spirit of the Metapolitefsi ("regime change") in Greece after the fall of the Junta in 1974, the composer's tendency to set the tragedies in Ancient Greek was generally received as both elitist and reactionary: firstly, because performing in open air theaters during the summer months was considered a spectacle for the masses, for whom listening to Ancient Greek doomed the text to be incomprehensible; secondly, because this attitude inevitably connected itself with *the Greek language question*, a divisive political issue which had lingered on since the nineteenth century about whether the vernacular should become the official language of the Greek state, press, and education or not, and which was finally settled in favor of the vernacular in 1976, one year before the staging of Euripides's *Helen*.

Xenakis's stance was irrelevant to the question—his purposes were auditory and artistic: he believed that using the original text allowed the composer to tamper with the beauty of the language, and also created a sense of distance that was necessary for the artist as well as for the audience (especially in the case that they were native speakers) who could follow a simultaneous translation in surtitles.[26] It is true that such a cosmopolitan stance did not match with Greek politics prevalent at the time: for the Left, it was too elitist, while at the same time it questioned the Conservatives' traditional zeal to prove that Modern Greeks were the heirs of Ancient Greek civilization—how could they watch an Attic tragedy with surtitles, on equal terms with foreigners? It also annihilated in one go the very existence and flourishing of the National Theater of Greece, which, since its founding in Athens in 1931, had presented the staging of Attic tragedies in Modern Greek as the epitome of its cultural role, and had trained dozens of actors to this end.

It is not known if Rotas remembered the young Xenakis as having been among his students, or if he and Xenakis had the chance to meet again after 1974, when the composer was allowed to enter Greece, and before Rotas's death in 1977. Rotas must have been aware of Xenakis's later career, especially since one of his sons, Nikiforos Rotas (1929–2004), also became a composer of contemporary music; Vassilis Rotas's 1965 review of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* (directed by Alexis Minotis) and *The Persians*

δημιουργηθοῦν αὐθεντικές παραστάσεις καί ἴσως ὕστερα ἀπό 2 ἤ 3 γενεές νά ὑπάρχει τό βάθρο μιᾶς τέχνης μεγάλης στάθμης].

26 Xenakis's idea about surtitles was expressed in 1975 during his collaboration with the director Alexis Minotis on the staging of Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, which finally fell through—see Ιωακείμ [Ioakeim], 2018, p. 114. It was a pioneering proposal, when one considers that it predated its international application in the field of opera by about a decade.

(directed by Karolos Koun), both set to music by Jani Christou (1926–70)[27] shows that he might have been positive towards Xenakis's music.

Be that as it may, there is a striking essay by Rotas, "Space and Time," that was published on 15 October 1943, during the Occupation:[28] apart from the remarkable fact that a man of the theater tackled such a philosophical subject at that time, amidst dark though elevating years, and provided important insights, one cannot help but wonder whether Xenakis had read it then, and how much of it is echoed forty-five years later in his 1988 essay "On Time," where he discusses the perennial conflict between Heraclitus and Parmenides with regard to time.[29] The elective affinities of the two men remain a fascinating matter that needs to be investigated further.

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