

# META-XENAKIS

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON IANNIS XENAKIS'S LIFE, WORK,  
AND LEGACIES

EDITED BY SHARON KANACH AND PETER NELSON





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# 24. Liberated Music. A Loving Testimony

*Nikos Kornilios*

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A shell explodes.  
A young man, a young fighter, screams in pain.  
The shrapnel has torn his face off.  
He falls next to dead fighters, or some seriously wounded, and some survivors.

The young fighter with his wounded face is named Iannis.  
Among the survivors, his friend, Manolis.  
My father.

It was the last combat of the Lord Byron Company  
from the People's Army of National Liberation,  
which fought against the Nazis during the Occupation in Greece  
and which continued to fight against the British invader  
at the beginning of the Civil War.  
An atrocious civil war broke out in December '44.  
And there, on 1 January 1945, it was the last fight of the Lord Byron  
Company, against the English, and the Greek government that supported  
them.

The young fighters—they were about thirty or forty of them.  
They had the courage to confront the English Army to the last squares of the  
fighting in Athens, by occupying a building on Didot Street—in the center  
of Athens.

It represents the courage that these young people had—students from Polytechnic, like the young Iannis, or the Faculty of Political Science, like my father.

They were not soldiers; they had no weapons; and yet they had the courage to go into battle—a last battle.

After this shell burst, Vassilis, the commander, a young student too, he tried—with a group—to make his way out, but they were all killed or captured.

Years later, my father often told me this story, about this last battle of Didot Street,  
and often referred to his friend, Iannis.

My father's description of this battle,  
he always referred to his friend who had been mortally wounded.  
He thought he was dead, Iannis, who fell next to him, his face torn off by the shrapnel.

He told this story often, with his friends, when they talked about the stories of the Resistance. He often talked about this battle of Didot Street.  
It was a crucial moment for him.

Afterwards, deportations followed, really very difficult moments.  
Their defeat.

These were moments that remained engraved in the memory of all these young people.

At the time, they deeply believed in—that a better world was possible—the ideal of the socialist revolution—that all these young revolutionaries, with deep faith—

all unaware that while they were fighting their battle the world was already divided—

and that Greece was going to belong to the West...

I believe that despite their very different paths, they kept the same emotion, the same quality of memory around these important events.

Then, time passed, the military dictatorship arrived in Greece like from a chapter of this period impregnated by the Civil War.

I fled this country of dictatorship and colonels and moved to Paris when I was eighteen.

Of course, I didn't know anything about the story of Iannis Xenakis;  
I did not know that it was the same Iannis my father talked about.  
And who was a famous composer.

I arrived in Paris. I was eager for new worlds, new experiences, openness,  
everything that Greece—at that time—could not offer me.

I was interested in art, music...theater...

I dedicated myself to music.

I discovered the music of Xenakis—which was love upon first hearing—  
an extraordinary breakthrough for a young man coming from Athens.

And then I decided to follow his courses at the Sorbonne.

I enrolled in his seminar.

There, I had the chance to meet Sharon Kanach—whom I thank for this  
invitation; Sharon, my lifelong friend.

And I followed his courses, trying to understand the mechanisms of his  
music.

Iannis was not Schönberg—he was not a man who wanted to create a school  
of his own.

On the contrary, he was a very solitary man, even from his students.

So he would turn his back on us; he would write mathematical equations on  
the blackboard—which nobody understood (or pretended to understand.)

And he would pretend to explain to us.

That's how his class was conducted.

At a certain point, I started to write my first scores.

I dared to present one of my first works in his class.

And then—little by little—a real master-pupil relationship began to develop  
in the sense that I wrote pieces and was lucky enough to have them  
performed.

Xenakis showed himself more and more receptive with regard to my scores,  
even on pieces that were in the process of being written.

And I also learned by chance that he supported, without telling me  
anything—

keeping the distance of master to student—the publication of my scores by  
Salabert.

These scores began to be played by important ensembles of the time and in festivals, like Musica.

And this relationship evolved but remained within the strict framework of his seminar at the Sorbonne.

We sometimes met a little before the course so that he had time to look at a new score.

He didn't give me advice; he just looked at it, and I don't think he even expressed an opinion on it. But I felt his moral support.

We used to talk about Greek poets for a long time, our preferences about contemporary poets when we walked out together at the end of the seminar.

Then, he was mounting his *Polytope de Mycènes* in Greece.

And so, thanks to things published in the press,  
my father discovered that Iannis Xenakis was indeed *that* Iannis,  
his companion from Didot Street  
where he believed he was dead, wounded in the face.  
He went to meet him in Mycenae

Me, I lent a hand to work a bit with the chorus which took part in the  
*Polytope*.

But I was not present at this meeting.

My father told me afterwards the emotion that he felt—enormous—when  
meeting Iannis Xenakis, who he saw between two rehearsals during the  
madness of the *Polytope of Mycènes*.

They talked about the details of that battle, they told each other things,  
as though it happened yesterday.

And so, my father was very, very moved to have found Iannis  
and to share with him things from that time.

I continued to attend his seminar in Paris  
and to have the relationship with him that I have already described.

We never said a single word about this meeting:

I knew, he knew, but we never talked about it.

It concerned him and my father.

Of course, I was really surprised by this law of probability that Iannis  
Xenakis was indeed this Iannis my father knew.

He too, surely, was astonished, but he did not comment on it.

I felt that deep down another quality was beginning to take place between  
the two of us, but by doing things, as it were.

And... when I was about thirty years old, little by little I began to say to myself

that even if my music was played in festivals, like in Avignon, in Musica and by Itinéraire, 2e2m, many European festivals, by IRCAM... I began to say to myself that it would always be sub-Xenakis. And I didn't like that.

It's something that put me in a kind of horizon that was drawn by Iannis Xenakis

and it's something that I couldn't accept, by my personality.

I decided to end everything, to stop writing music and move on to something else.

At that time, I already had a love for theater.

I wrote things for the theater:

*Nuit des Suppliantes*, a work of musical theater [at ARC], creations with the ATEM,

at Chaillot, on the invitation of Antoine Vitez ... *The Seventh Door*.

Directing began to gain more and more ground, I decided to turn to the cinema.

I left Paris in my thirties and returned to Greece...

with a very deep nostalgia, to find my language, in my light...everything that I feel is my biosphere.

I wrote a letter to Iannis Xenakis telling him the news

that I had decided to give up composition and turn to cinema.

I had called him on the phone from Athens to talk to him and tell him that.

I felt, on his end, that he felt it a bit as a betrayal,

because I didn't talk to him about all that, about my different interests that emanated from feeling a little bit in a dead end

by writing music that I characterized as "sub-Xenakis"...

which worked very well for several others

who imitated his style and succeeded in their careers,

all while doing 'sub-Xenakis.' But let's close this parenthesis.

I told him the news and we left each other, if I may say so, as friends.

And so, it was the moment of separation...

launching my new life,

the fact that the cinema interested me more and more, the fact of having returned to Greece.

That's it!

We lost touch, no contact. I always listened to his new works with admiration. I remember the moment when one of my pieces, *Stehen*, was played in

Strasbourg at the same time as Iannis,  
with a performance of his *Jonchaies*. It was extraordinary, a masterpiece!  
At the end of the concert, I told him.

"I'm not the one who's going to tell you that it's really a masterpiece."  
"But no, but no, I need your opinion, how you found the work."

I also remember when he was listening to another piece of mine, a string trio,  
*Pros*,  
where I had tried slower passages, or rather with less energy and more  
interiority.

When I played him this music I had the impression that he was getting a little  
impatient,

that he didn't appreciate it very much and I said to him:

"I tried to introduce a slower movement in this piece of music.

Your music, it's always full of energy and I tried to detach myself from this a  
little bit."

He answered me with a real: "But maybe it's not good  
that there is always this energy in my music."

I told him: "No, no, no! I admire that but I tried to do something a little  
different."

Despite his influence on 20<sup>th</sup> century music and beyond, he was probably a  
man who was always  
deep inside himself, questioning his art, his evolution, his place.

This energy that is in his music, this inherent violence in his music,  
it was a response to this violence he received, this shrapnel that tore his face  
off

and that he transformed into a luminous violence, a violence of beauty, a  
sublime violence.

His violence, which I love so much in his music,  
this energy that I love so much,  
which is always...there is always this force, this energy behind it, vital.  
Violence, of the cosmos, of the universe.

It is the violence of love—*Anaktoria*—

It is the violence of feelings, of passions. It is the violence of life...  
which is opposed to the petty violence of war.



And...the more I listen to his music the more I appreciate this energy.  
*Jonchaies*, for example, cosmic violence.  
*Phlegra*...some examples...*Aïs*  
But all of his music,  
we understand at once that it is Xenakis  
by this vital force, this energy.

And which is the the buzz of life, which is the explosion of organic cells of  
life.

I believe that all great art has the characteristic of sublimation of this part of  
ourselves:  
black, violent, vital, something that takes shape, becomes an artistic gesture—  
catharsis—  
that tells us that the catastrophe of life, inherent to life and death...  
all of that is part of ourselves and we must face it.

Art is there to make of all this something beautiful,  
something that gives us courage, to live, to continue to create, to love.

Iannis Xenakis was a human being deeply attached to his principles  
which were the principles of his youth and which made him a young  
revolutionary,  
courageous to go without hesitation with the last fighters  
to this last battle of Didot Street that they knew in advance would be lost, but  
he was there.

All his life was this young revolutionary, this young man  
who always questioned his art, music, and who always wanted to be ahead of  
the game,  
who wanted to make a step forward,  
who wanted to evolve by transgressing and by transforming the universe of  
sound, art  
and the way of perceiving our universe.

I believe that his music is—if I dare say the word *truth*.

It comes from something lived that has, as with the great writers—the great ones are strong when they manage to deposit their deep, intimate truth.

The same is true for music, even if the language is different.

I believe that Iannis Xenakis became a great composer, because from one year to another, from one piece to another, he deposited his deepest truth, his intimate being.

And this music shines by its inner truth, which is a truth born of love and amorous violence.