

# META-XENAKIS

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

EDITED BY SHARON KANACH AND PETER NELSON





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# 46. A New Documentary: *Iannis Xenakis: Music of the Universe*

*Apostolos Loufopoulos, Renata Dalianoudi, Iakovos Panagopoulos, and Hari Marini*

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## About Iannis Xenakis

Xenakis's identity as an architect made him approach musical composition in an architectural way: he could see both the big picture and the details at the same time, something contrary to the terms of composing according to the classical musical education, which starts with the simple and reaches, step by step, the most elaborate. The details, however, like melody, had a secondary and rather undefined role within the "sound masses" he created, which moved from absolute order to absolute disorder through mathematical stochastic laws in a continuous or explosive manner. Manos Hadjidakis (1925–1994), an Oscar-winning Greek composer, said about Xenakis in 1966:

Xenakis had the courage to ignore the music traditions of five hundred years (meaning to ignore music history from the Renaissance onwards) and to reposition himself, with all the power of a genuine Greek spirit, bequeathing us a kind of music, certainly not the one we inherited and got used to. [...] His repositioning of music's essence creates a primitive aural/sound effect, beyond the wise academia of the rules of traditional music. Xenakis is very important because he is the first composer in the history of Greek music who dares to re-exist as a Greek. Some more time is needed to realize his importance so that we, too, get to know, through him, our deepest modern Greek temperament.<sup>1</sup>

## About the Documentary

The Department of Audio and Visual Arts of the Ionian University, as a partner of the Meta-Xenakis Consortium, wishes to offer quite an "alternative" documentary on

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<sup>1</sup> Hadjidakis, 1966.

Xenakis's work from a new perspective, presenting both the key-happenings in his life (based on archival and ethnographic research), as well as the *meta*-Xenakis impact on contemporary performance and contemporary electroacoustic music inspired both by his life and work.

The documentary *Iannis Xenakis: Music of the Universe*, directed by Dr. Iakovos Panagopoulos, offers a fresh approach to Xenakis's life and work, and contributes to a better understanding of his creative, unconventional, pioneering thinking and composing. Focusing on crucial political and social happenings in Xenakis's life, this documentary—as a condensed study—yields new insight into the composer's attitude and work. Through the ethnographic method of the interview, the interviewees' statements reveal the extent to which social and political events formed Xenakis's personal choices and aesthetics.

Both the performance, devised and directed by Dr. Hari Marini, and the sound design and music, written by Dr. Apostolos Loufopoulos, are works within the work, completely integrated. The modular performance represents in a more creative and impulsive way the three different parts/acts of Xenakis's life as well as the emotional connotations that emerge, with the help of the dense existence of music, while the soundtrack's structure reflects Xenakis's approach of massive sound-clouds and detailed sound entities.

Dr. Renata Dalianoudi

Communication and Promotion Executive

Musicologist, Associate Professor, Ionian University

## Director's Statement

Directing a documentary about the life and work of Iannis Xenakis was a great challenge; to be able to capture some important information about his life and approach it from a different angle than the films that have already been made. From the start of the pre-production process, we decided to focus more on his life and less on his work since most of the existent documentaries deal with his music, his architectural background, and the connection between these two. Moreover, I always found his life journey and his connection with politics and history fascinating.

The documentary is divided into three parts/acts that each represent a period of Xenakis's life. The first act deals with his earlier life in Greece, his connection with politics, the *Dekemvriana* (December Days) in 1944, and his injury until his self-exile in France. The second act focuses on his life in Paris, his relationship with other composers, and the atmosphere of the era. The last part deals with his return to Greece after the end of the Colonels' Dictatorship and the performance of his *Polytope de Mycènes* in 1978. All three parts are narrated through interviews by scholars, musicians, researchers, and people close to Xenakis. These interviews are enriched

with archival footage from the Greek National Television and archival photos from KSYME (Contemporary Music Research Center) in Athens.

We decided also to create three “bridges” as transitions between the acts. We created four performance videos; the last three represent each period of Xenakis’s life discussed above as a “performance bridge,” while the first one is just an introduction to our film and the aesthetic or form of the documentary. These interludes really help us to transition our audience from one period to the next, and also to provide the opportunity to visually underline our own perspective of Xenakis’s journey through the years.

Dr. Iakovos Panagopoulos

Director

Assistant Professor, Ionian University

## Music and Sound Design

The composition of the music for *Iannis Xenakis: Music of the Universe* constituted another challenge, as it has been an effort to express the historical facts aurally, including emotional content that emerges through this documentation of Iannis Xenakis’s life over the three different periods. Music and sound design accompany the narration and tell their own story with sounds and instrumental/electronic arrangements.

The sounding content can be described as a soundtrack for film, utilizing electronic music with a cinematographic character, including special tracks combined with the performance video “bridges,” as well as individual sound design elements: micro-forms, deconstructed musical textures, and events used to emphasize visual changes and images of the film, emotions, etc., which arise throughout the narration. The inspiration for the music came from listening to the filmed interviews and decoding their narrations, and thus a number of separate musical tracks were created and mixed in the background. But the main musical body lies within the performance introduction and bridges, where a dense musical atmosphere is heard, serving as a basis for the psychological and kinetic expression of the performer.

The greatest technical challenge was to create “music for the music:” Iannis Xenakis’s music is unique and well-known for its characteristics and innovations, but cannot be imitated. The soundtrack structure is inspired by the creative philosophy behind his technique, especially the idea of contradiction between massive sound-clouds and detailed sound entities/individualities. The use of *glissandi* often expresses a “continuous change” and the combination of instrumental sounds (piano, percussion, classical orchestra electronically transformed) with synthesized sonic content are some of the fundamental characteristics of the soundtrack, influenced by the structuring scope which Xenakis gave to the music world as a compositional legacy. Finally, soundscape composition was utilized to play the role of real-world

sound effects, which are mixed within the sounding content as part of the musical structure, providing it with a more realistic narrative character where needed.

Dr. Apostolos Loufopoulos  
Composer/Sound Designer  
Associate Professor, Ionian University

### Performance-making in *Iannis Xenakis: Music of the Universe*

Devising and directing the performance acts that function as transitional segments between the interviews and archival material in the documentary *Iannis Xenakis: Music of the Universe* was an intriguing undertaking that allowed for the possibility of experimenting both in terms of content and form. Iannis Xenakis's groundbreaking work in music composition, alongside his commitment to architecture, science, and philosophy, as well as his engagement with politics—especially during devastating periods in history—provoked a broad spectrum of responses and thoughts that were explored artistically. The aim of the performance was not to reconstruct a specific historical period, but to provide an insight into Xenakis's life; to creatively interpret the atmosphere and connotations emerging from significant turning points in his life and career.

The process of making the performance involved research as well as a series of improvisations, writing, and intense physical work with the performer, Vasiliki Makou. The improvisations focused on the imaginative use of objects, the kinaesthetic response in relation to space and music, the development of physical actions and gestures; also, pieces of writing were created and used as prompts for further exploration and personal engagement. During the rehearsals, objects—such as a suitcase, a ladder, a steel drum, a ball of wool, a seashell, marbles, a piece of gauze—and creative writing were introduced and were explored through movement, repetitive actions, durational postures, accidental encounters, in order to encourage experimentation, imaginative associations, and unexpected uses. The performance-making process triggered personal responses and memories that heightened the atmosphere in each act.

The final composition of the performance was shaped by selecting, combining, and developing movement sequences and gestures that echoed aspects of Xenakis's life and were effectively integrated into the music composed for the documentary by Dr. Apostolos Loufopoulos. Given that the performance was devised to be filmed, it was important to consider the use of spatial elements, the movement, the lighting, the focus of performance segments, the shot angles, the rhythm of actions, and the overall aesthetic in collaboration with the director of the documentary, Dr. Iakovos Panagopoulos, and the Black Dogs Production team. As mentioned, each section of the performance functions as a transition between the interviews and archival audiovisual material; it shifts viewers' attention from facts to an imaginative journey created by

the performance and calls for a different engagement. The performance aims to add another layer to the documentary, expanding the viewer's experience by inviting them to immerse in Xenakis's fascinating journey in music and life.

Dr. Hari Marini  
Performance Director  
Associate Professor, Ionian University

Ιωάννης Ξενάκης: Η Μουσική του Σύμπαντος |  
*Iannis Xenakis: Music of the Universe*

*Please note that the documentary is for educational purposes only and cannot be  
screened without the permission of the creators*

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