

HEAR AND NOW 10.01.04

Hello and welcome to the second of our two programmes featuring the music of one of the 20th centuries most striking composers - Iannis Xenakis. This week's show is entirely dedicated to his music, with a concert given at the end of last year by the BBC Symphony Orchestra at the Maida Vale studios in London, with the solo pianist Nicolas Hodges and there's also some non-orchestral Xenakis from the Australian percussionist Claire Edwardes, who we recorded at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival back in 2002.

Tonight, we'll begin and end with two works from 1987, *Ata* and *Tracées*, moving full circle via one of Xenakis's earliest acknowledged works, the *Six Chansons* for solo piano from 1951. And you'll be hearing this alongside the far more technically demanding and characteristic second piano concerto *Erikhthon; Empreintes* (Imprints) written just one year later and displaying equal energy and drive; another very early work *Le Sacrifice*, and *Rebonds* for solo percussion. I'll also be talking to Nicolas Hodges and the conductor Pascal Rophé about their performances of Xenakis' work and you'll be getting a glimpse of the composer himself in a conversation from the BBC archives recorded at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in 1987.

But we begin with the UK premiere of *Tracées*, a 6 minute bomb-shell of a work which, with a characteristically vehement sense of ritual, is all the more powerful for its compressed duration, etched with huge chords, clusters and soaring glissandi. The BBC Symphony Orchestra is conducted here by Pascal Rophé.

Iannis Xenakis: *Tracées*

Pascal Rophé was conducting Xenakis' *Tracées*, given its UK premiere there by the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

And now to a work written more than 30 years earlier. *Le Sacrifice* was originally intended to form the third part of a trilogy, beginning with Xenakis' more widely known piece *Metastaseis* and the more obscure *La Procession aux beaux claires*. The entire cycle represents the anasenaria, a ceremony which still takes place in Northern Greece in which the participants dance on red-hot embers. *Le Sacrifice*, although being written back in 1953, was withheld from performance by the composer until shortly before his death. But despite the fact that it is obviously not representative of the fully-fledged composer, Xenakis' trade-mark of ritual evoked through modern rationality can be clearly heard. Just 6 minutes in duration, this piece is formed of only 8 notes, spread across the

entire register of the orchestra with microtones and glissandi causing additional beating and distortion of the pitches. But Xenakis doesn't allow the emotional content of the piece to be drained away by this restrained approach. Quite the opposite. The intensity of the repeated notes is quite terrifying at times and the music ends with an unresolved question mark that leaves us in no doubt that the emotions unleashed in this work will return again and again in later pieces.

Iannis Xenakis: *Le Sacrifice*

The BBC Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Pascal Rophé in that performance of Xenakis' early work *Le Sacrifice*.

Well, the next piece in tonight's programme is a very different animal altogether. Where *Le Sacrifice* is an exercise in extreme containment, *Erikhthon* is an explosion of orchestral and piano writing. The soloist in this performance is Nicolas Hodges, and I asked him how he navigates his way through a score of such rhythmic and textural complexity.

Interview: Nicolas Hodges

Iannis Xenakis: *Erikhthon*

The UK premiere of Xenakis' second piano concerto *Erikhthon* was given there by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Pascal Rophé. The soloist was Nicolas Hodges.

You're listening to *Hear and Now* with me Alwynne Pritchard and tonight is the second of our two programmes featuring the music of Iannis Xenakis. Although Xenakis' musical identity is perhaps most easily recognisable in his orchestral pieces, he also wrote many chamber and solo works and it's interesting to hear how he writes for solo percussion in our next piece tonight - *Rebonds*. Obviously, his palette of orchestral resources simply isn't available here, so his hall-mark glissandi and combination of instrumental timbres simply can't be used. The inevitable paring-down and focus on rhythm means that Xenakis can still express his fascination with ritual, but the result is more poised and less devastating than in his orchestral works. This performance of *rebonds* was given by Claire Edwards at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in 2002.

Iannis Xenakis: *Rebonds*

Claire Edwards was the soloist in that performance of *Rebonds* by Iannis Xenakis, given at the

Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in 2002.

Xenakis was frequently featured at that particular festival, and in 1987 he gave a public interview to Richard Steinitz, the former festival director. What's fascinating about this 30-minute interview is the degree to which Xenakis, often thought of as a shy composer when it came to discussing personal details and aspects of his past, gives us an illuminating insight into his artistic credo.

Interview: Iannis Xenakis

Iannis Xenakis obviously relishing the ambiguity and confusion caused by his unique musical style. And of course, his music is quite unlike anything else: as Xenakis himself said in that interview, his work is not about marrying things together but about giving birth to the new. Obviously, though, his music is inevitably the child of his own past and Xenakis' early experiences in Greece had a powerful impact on him. I wasn't surprised, then, when I picked up a collection of interviews with the composer and opened the page on the words 'I don't think music ought to be pleasant all the time. Profound music is never like that. Sometimes, perhaps, but most of the time it is fearsome. No really great music is tender.' That said, his very early *Six Chansons* for solo piano, from 1951, do reveal a tender and literate musical personality that is undoubtedly close to its musical heritage. So rare as never to be heard these days, the chansons are a collection of folk song arrangements, written while Xenakis was having lessons with Honegger and Milhaud, and they make more than a passing nod in the direction of Bartók. But the last of the six pieces seems to fight for freedom from the past, looking ahead to something of the piano writing that is familiar to us in Xenakis' later works. Once again, the soloist here is Nicolas Hodges.

Iannis Xenakis: *Six Chansons*

Xenakis' *Six Chansons* - folk song arrangements from 1951 - were performed by Nicolas Hodges in a concert recorded a couple of months ago especially for Hear and Now.

But now to the full impact of Xenakis' later orchestral writing. *Empreintes* was written in 1975, just one year after *Erikhthon* and is similarly scored for a huge battery of wind and strings with no percussion and this time without piano. I spoke to the conductor of this performance, Pascal Rophé and asked him about the particular challenges of conducting Xenakis.

Interview: Pascal Rophé

Iannis Xenakis: *Empreintes*

The BBC Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Pascal Rophé in that performance of Xenakis' *Empreintes*.

Now back to 1987, where the program began, and another cataclysmic work of Primeval energy. *Ata* is the ancient Doric word meaning a derangement of the senses and to me this piece is all the more deranged for the moments of musical lucidity, clarity and directness on which the structure of the piece seems to hang. This 15 minute, single movement span will leave you in no doubt about the conviction and vision with which Xenakis steers his music towards its ruthless conclusion.

Iannis Xenakis: *Ata*

Repeated chords that are neither resolute nor triumphant but leave you waiting for more. Unmistakably the music of Iannis Xenakis - his monumental *Ata* was performed there by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Pascal Rophé. And that concert was given especially for tonight's edition of Hear and Now.

And that's it for tonight. Thanks for joining me. Ivan Hewett will be here next week with two concerts from the BBC Symphony Orchestra's Cage weekend, music for string quartet and music for percussion.