

Nov. 30/81

# New Music's Xenakis proves intriguing fare

In a hallucinatory fit of exaggeration engendered by the gentleman's imminent arrival, Toronto's New Music Concerts has advertised Iannis Xenakis as "the twentieth century's most important composer."

Poor Stravinsky. Poor Schoenberg. Poor who-knows-how-many-other candidates yet to be canonized. It is so easy, so premature and so stupid to attempt to pre-empt history's role in making such a definitive judgment.

What anyone who heard Xenakis' music in the latest New Music Concert at Walter Hall during the weekend can say is that this Rumanian-born Greek who lives in France numbers among the most individual voices of our day.

Of all the major composers to have emerged in the last three decades, he is the one who has taken us farthest toward a cosmic theory of music, applying the laws of mathematics and physics to musical operations.

Just how the Kinetic Theory of Gases or the formulations of mathematical logic can be made to produce interesting compositions defies brief verbal explanation, witness the impenetrability of the composer's own program notes for the New Music Concert.

But the fact remains that they do.



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**Music**

The two Xenakis pieces on that program embody enough fascinating sounds and procedures to intrigue any pair of ears connected to a brain.

Indeed, Robert Aitken, who conducted the second of the pieces, *Pleiades* (1979), confessed that the musicians had spent a full 35 hours of rehearsal, plus countless hours of individual practise, to get their performance together.

## Surviving experience

I'm not surprised. *Pleiades* puts six percussionists through some of the most intricate combinations of interlocking and overlapping rhythmic patterns that they are ever likely to encounter and the sheer stamina necessary to sustain this level of complexity through the four sections of the work must have drained them physically as well as mentally.

But what an achievement! Robert Becker, John Brownell, David Cam-

pion, Robin Engleman, Russell Har-tenberger and Beverley Johnston deserve the Order of Pythagoras, first class, for surviving the experience with their metres intact.

The same might be said of the audience, some of whose members actually left the hall during the third of the four sections to protect their ears from a barrage of metallic sounds that made Wagner's *Niebelung* anvils sound like the tinkling of toy triangles.

The section bears the title *Sixxen*, in reference to the instrument Xenakis invented to play it. The New Music Concerts people weren't quite sure at first how to build such an instrument, incorporating 19 irregularly spaced microtonal intervals, but with the aid of lengths of pipe and sheet metal, they armed each of the six percussionists with one and the percussionists duly bashed the living daylights out of them.

Frankly, I don't think the tonal variety implicit in the use of those 19 intervals actually emerged from the tone clusters produced by all the banging. Certainly, the other three movements (*Melanges*, using a blend of instruments, *Claviers*, using keyboards, and especially *Peaux*, using

drums) offered more to captivate the ear.

But it was interesting, nonetheless, to find directionality in the tone clusters, since so much of Xenakis' so-called stochastic music involves masses of sounds rather than melody lines.

There virtually had to be melody lines in *Theraps* (1976), the other Xenakis opus on the program, by virtue of its scoring for double bass solo. The wonder here was how one player — the brilliant Joe Quarrington — could produce so many contrasted effects in so concentrated a time period.

## Few Words

Coaxed to introduce his music with a few words, Xenakis explained that it is a problem in composition not to be too rich and not too poor. In both *Theraps* and *Pleiades*, poverty was hardly the problem.

Nor was it for Quebec's Yves Daoust, whose *Valse* faced the unenviable task of opening a concert bound to be dominated by the music of another man. *Valse* turned out to be almost too full of things for its own good — from a recorded rainstorm to telephones, buzzers and distant vocal sounds, as it presented its lightly satirical look at the world in three-quarter time.