

New Music Concerts presents

The Music of Iannis Xenakis

New Music Concerts Ensemble | Robert Aitken, director

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35th season | 295th event
Friday, June 9, 2006
Glenn Gould Studio
 Introduction 7:15
 Concert 8:00

New Music Concerts presents

The Music of Iannis Xenakis

New Music Concerts Ensemble | Robert Aitken, director
 Guest Artist: **Lori Freedman**, bass clarinet

Programme:

Iannis Xenakis *Phlegra* (1975) for 11 instruments

Iannis Xenakis *Échange* (1989)
 for bass clarinet and ensemble • **Lori Freedman**, solo bass clarinet

— *Intermission* —

James Harley (Canada 1959) *aXis* (2006) for 13 instruments
 (World Premiere, NMC commission)

Iannis Xenakis (Greece/France 1922- 2001) *Jalons* (1986) for 15 instruments

New Music Concerts Ensemble

Douglas Stewart flute • **Keith Atkinson** oboe • **Max Christie** clarinets
Lori Freedman bass clarinets (*Jalons*) • **Kathleen McLean** bassoon
Fraser Jackson bassoons (*Jalons*) • **Joan Watson** horn
James Gardiner trumpet • **Ian Cowie** trombone • **Scott Irvine** tuba
Erica Goodman harp • **Fujiko Imajishi** violin • **Corey Gemmell** violin
Douglas Perry viola • **David Hetherington** cello • **Peter Pavlovsky** bass

soundaXis
 Architecture • Music • Acoustics

Editorial note: The following biography incorporates extracts from an extensive interview conducted with Iannis Xenakis by New Music Concerts co-founder Norma Beecroft in Toronto on July 8, 1977. It is published here for the first time. Further reproduction of Ms. Beecroft's text is forbidden without the author's permission.

Iannis Xenakis (1922–2001) belonged to the pioneering generation of composers who revolutionized 20th-century music after World War II. With the ardour of an outsider to academic musical life, he was one of the first to replace traditional musical thinking with radical new concepts of sound composition. His musical language had a strong influence on many younger composers in and outside of Europe, but it remained singular for its uncompromising harshness and conceptual rigour.

Norma Beecroft: What attracted you to music?

Iannis Xenakis: I don't know, music itself, I suppose. I remember when I was about five my mother had brought me once a small flute, and she made some sounds with it, and I was fascinated by that. I didn't go to any concerts in Rumania, but I was very sensitive, as I remember, to any kind of music, especially the light music. That was the kind that was available. And when I went to this school, I remember we had studies in the evening, and there was a piano teacher who used to play for himself, especially Bach I think, and the whole building was resounding so I couldn't work any more. I was about eleven or twelve.

I was very impressed by that, and I decided to take piano lessons. So I started, but in a disorderly way, more or less, with teachers here and there. It was only when I was 15 or 16 that I heard Beethoven's Fifth which was broadcast on the radio, and I was pinned down, I couldn't move. Interesting, eh? And then, I didn't yet decide to make compositions, I didn't know that I had to do that. We had a school head master who was British, because it was run by both British and Greek people, and he took three or four of us who were interested in music, and we had concerts in the evening of records, and I heard many things at that time. Then, when I finished high school, I went to Athens to prepare engineering studies.

There, in '39, I decided I had also to study composition. Quite late. But again, I didn't dare to go into a school of music, fortunately I think I didn't do that, but I started with that man who was a refugee from Russia, and who was a pupil of Hippolitov Ivanov, therefore very traditional although a very serious musician, and with him I learned by heart all the voices of the Mozart *Requiem*, for instance. Then, I had to stop because of the war, we didn't have money, and I was engaged in the resistance against the Nazis. But I continued preparing engineering at the Polytechnic School of Athens and passed very difficult examinations. I passed on just the day when the Italians invaded Greece, October 28th, 1940, so the school was closed, and then it opened and closed several times during the war because of the student unrest and the resistance in which I was involved. I was several times in prison, and so on.

NB: Did you have a lot of exposure to ethnic music when you were young?

IX: That's right. To traditional Greek music, and also the Rumanian music, and also to the Eastern church music, and I used to sing as a schoolboy. We were taken to church every Sunday, and we were singing some chant. I was formed in this kind of anarchic but also very rich musical environment. This is why, I suppose, I could not follow any specific path in music later on, in composition anyway. I had to invent one for myself.

In order to earn his living, Xenakis worked until 1959 in Le Corbusier's studio, at first as an engineer, but gradually playing a greater part in architectural design. He designed the kindergarten on the roof of the residential block in Nantes-Rézé, parts of the government buildings in Chandigarh, India, the rhythmically articulated glass façade of the monastery of St Marie de La Tourette, near Lyons, and the greater part of the chapel there. Finally, he was responsible for the unique shape of the Philips Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels Exposition Universelle, based on a sketch of Le Corbusier. Most of his later architectural projects were intended for musical uses: a concert hall and studio for Scherchen's musical centre in Gravesano (Ticino) in 1961 and the same for the Cité de la Musique in Paris in 1984; but the only design to be realized was the Diatope, one of his invented Polytopes. The space for a unique sound-and-light experience, it comprised a tent-like construction which was erected outside the Centre Pompidou in Paris for its opening in 1977 and later re-erected in Bonn for a Xenakis festival.

NB: It sounds as though you have had more acceptance outside of Europe than inside of it [in the early 1950s].

IX: In France, I had no acceptance at all. I was first accepted in Germany, in spite of this block of serialists, because of Donaueschingen, and then because of Scherchen, who conducted "Pithoprakta" in early '57 in the series of concerts of Carl Amadeus Hartmann in Munich. It was also a terrible scandal, and I had almost no supporters there. All the papers the next day were discussing my piece saying very interesting things, saying it looked as if it was a worm of nickel, chrome or nickel, eating corpses.

NB: Why did you continue to live in Europe with that attitude around you?

IX: I had to work to earn my living. As I told you, I became interested in architecture, and in '51 I started tackling architecture, because at that time, the ateliers of Le Corbusier were cleaned out. That is, until then Le Corbusier had in his office a group of engineers, many Greeks (which is how I found a job there). After 1951 there remained only architects, very few, who Le Corbusier wanted to keep with him. I had only technical training, so I was a kind of advisor for all the projects in engineering. So I saw how Le Corbusier was working, and I was very attracted by his personality, as he was all the time discussing the things that he was working on, I mean, working, practically, *sur la table*, and I found a correlation with what I was trying to do in music with what he was doing in architecture, the approach. This is how I entered into aesthetical and technical problems of architecture, not only as an engineer. I asked him if I could do a project with him of pure architecture, and he said "of course, I have something in mind for you". And that was the Monastery of La Tourette, the monastery near Lyons, and I designed the whole project with him, and then other ones followed as well. So, in France, in '57, I was finally accepted into the Studio for Electroacoustic Music, after four years. So you see how the cliques are, eh?

Ln Paris, Xenakis tried to compensate for the musical education he had missed during the war through self-directed study by taking lessons with Honegger and Milhaud. He also attended Messiaen's analysis course at the Conservatoire (1950–52). Between 1955 and 1966 Scherchen repeatedly invited him to Gravesano, where he met musicians and experts in electro-acoustics (including Max Mathews). The articles Xenakis contributed to Scherchen's *Gravesaner Blätter* formed the basis for his book *Formalized Music* (the original French edition appeared in 1963).

NB: Well, you went through a pile of teachers, Honegger, Milhaud, for example.

IX: Yes, Honegger was the first one, because you just had to pay the fees, and you were accepted as a student of Honegger. I followed his classes and I wrote some music which I presented to him. He asked me to play it on the piano, and I played it, and then he said, "but here, it's a mistake, you have parallel fifths". And I said, "why not, I like them". "How can you like them, it's a mistake". "No, I don't feel it like that". "Here, you have parallel octaves", and so on. So, the more he was addressing me, the more I was defending myself. At the end, he said, "this is not music, there is no quality of music at all. Maybe in the first two measures, maybe". That was my experience with Honegger. It was finished.

NB: Did you learn very much from teachers?

IX: No. I didn't learn anything. That is why I stopped going to teachers. I even went to Nadia Boulanger, of course. But fortunately she said I was too primitive, and she couldn't waste her time with me, but that I was gifted.

NB: What did they try to teach you?

IX: I thought that I had to start again, to do all the studies that had been interrupted, harmony, counterpoint, and so on. And finally, someone told me, there is a man that might interest you. That man is named Messiaen, and he is at the Paris Conservatory. So I went and saw him and showed him what I did, and for the first time, I found somebody who said, you don't need studies at all. You have to just compose and listen to music, and that's all. Now, Messiaen is very proud that he said that to me at the time, because at that time, a music professor, a composer, who would say such a thing was absolutely unusual. I don't know why it happened, but he said so. He looked at my scores and he said "you are really gifted, they are naive", and when I was upset by that, he said, "No, you shouldn't be. I hope that I am naive myself". He meant by that that he was not dogmatic. So, he allowed me to go to his classes. That was a very good experience because of the way that he approached music in general, especially the things that he was doing, the way that he thought, I found myself in absolute agreement with what I was hoping unconsciously to do, that is, anything. So the way was freed.

NB: Is it around that period of time when you met Hermann Scherchen?

IX: Yes. I wanted to work with Pierre Schaeffer at his studio, not with Schaeffer but at his studio, so he asked me to show him some scores. So I gave him a score, but he couldn't read music and he asked Pierre Henry with whom he was friends at that time, still, to read them as he was a musician.

He had the idea to give them to Scherchen, who was at that time rehearsing "Deserts" of Varèse, in '53, and he told Pierre Henry that I should go to the rehearsal. There I met Varèse and Scherchen, and Scherchen asked me to come to his hotel at 7 o'clock in the morning the next day to discuss my work. So I went the next day, and I had under my arm the huge score of "Metastasis" that I had just finished. He told me that he had read the first score, a small work for eight instruments, and that it was an interesting score, but he didn't think he could perform it, it was not that interesting. So I said, "OK". He was in his bed, receiving. I said "OK. I'm sorry to disturb you, goodbye", and I was heading to the door. And he said "What do you have under your arm?", and I replied, "I have another score I wanted to show you", and he said, "let me see it". The score was very big, a large score, and I think it was the first score in musical history where all the strings and instruments have an individual stave. So as he was finishing a page, he let it drop on his face, and he continued with the next page. I didn't know what to do. I was trying to help him by pulling delicately the page he had just read. When he finished, he said, "This score shows me that you are bringing something into music which doesn't come from music, something different. But, you can't find an orchestra with twelve basses. It was for a large string orchestra.

NB: Quite a lot of basses for a normal orchestra.

IX: Yes. Maybe I had ten, but "if you want me to play it you have to write for a slightly smaller orchestra, to adapt your score, and also to write it smaller because you can't read that huge score". But in the meantime I had shown the score to another man, Fred Goldbeck, who was enthusiastic about it, and he asked me to write directly to Strobel. First I wrote to Mitropoulos in New York, and Mitropoulos answered saying he was too old to start again a new life, but he advised me to write to Strobel. So Goldbeck wrote to Strobel saying that it was an interesting score and that he should perform it at Donaueschingen. And Strobel sent me a cable saying that he was waiting to perform it, and who was going to do the parts. I had no publisher at that time. Also he was thinking of the boy who would turn the pages of the huge score. But, as I told you, in the meantime I saw Scherchen, and I told him about that, and he said, "well, never mind, he can do that in Donaueschingen, and I will do it in another place", because he felt that for me, it would be better to have Donaueschingen which he had founded in the twenties. So it was performed by Hans Rosbaud in '55. It took two years, you see.

From 1957 to 1962 Xenakis worked in Schaeffer's *Groupe de Recherches Musicales* (GRM; until 1958, *Studio d'essai de la Radio-Télévision Française*), where he realized his early electro-acoustic works. Invited to Japan in 1961, he received there enduring impressions of Asian musical culture which strengthened him in his idea of 'universal musical structures'. In 1962 Xenakis composed a group of instrumental works with the help of a computer at IBM Paris (Schmidt, 1995, Baltensperger, 1996). In order to extend his research into the nature of sound itself with the help of the computer, he founded EMAMu (*Equipe de Mathématique et Automatique Musicales*) in 1966, which in 1972 became CEMAMu (*Centre d'Etudes de Mathématique et Automatique Musicales*). From 1967 to 1972, Xenakis taught at Indiana University in Bloomington, where he also directed a Center for Mathematical and Automated Music. He was a visiting professor at the Sorbonne (1973-89), and was awarded a doctorate there for his interdisciplinary research (Arts/Sciences: alliages) in 1976.

NB: I was just wondering when the computer was 'invented'?

IX: It was during the war already, for military projects. It was used very much but with lamps [vacuum tubes], and technological explosions started in the middle of the fifties, especially when the transistor was invented, and the first generation with lamps was replaced with transistors and cards. So, I didn't have anything, but in '59 I got a contact with some IBM mathematician who was working there, and he became interested in what I was saying, and he succeeded in giving me a grant for computing time. And I studied programming, but all the theoretical background that I had done by hand, for example, the probability calculus that I introduced in instrumental composition, was ready to be used with the computer. I didn't start from nothing, it was there, and except for Hiller [at Indiana] who at that time was simulating counterpoint, I think I was the first to use the computer for a completely new type of composition, not serial at all, but based on probabilities, stochastic processes.

NB: And the situation today, for you?

IX: You see, things are growing up. I don't think many new ideas in composing are... I think the basic things that I did at that time, and later on, are worthwhile and have not been explored because I myself didn't have the means, but no one else had gone into more interesting directions. I made a basic, and still make a basic criticism about sound synthesis based on Fourier analysis, which is a narrow way of

approaching this problem, and I propose other things to do, but I have to explore them from that point of view. For instance, the French Government never gave me any support at all during all these years, and suddenly they gave all their support to Boulez who didn't care about these things at all. And they made that Centre, asking me and him to cooperate, because I had seen Pompidou wanted that, but when you do not direct the money, you can't cooperate, especially when you know there are no ideas in the other camp. So, I think much time was wasted, but...

NB: It sounds that your life has been very frustrated?

IX: It is, of course. There are so many things I could have done, but I couldn't because the means were not there, so I had the machine of the orchestra, providing that my music was accepted of course, and it finally was, especially when the so-called Polish school took the external features of my music. They were serial, and suddenly became massed musicians. So that was like a two-edged sword, one edge was that I had lost the uniqueness of the music. The second was that since they were following my path, it was like establishing my truth, you see. When you have followers, that's OK, but when you have no followers, nobody follows you.

NB: Your situation is obviously unusual. In a general sense, how do you see the computer world of music developing?

IX: I see the future of music in it, one of the basic futures of music. Not as it is now because there are many technological obstacles, but I think, as technology improves more and more, equipment becomes cheaper and more sophisticated, this will be the tool that encompasses all the dreams of the musician, that is, the machine which will not only produce the sound itself but also all the microstructures, by the use of mathematics and theories which are very vast, not from music only, but from everywhere, from genetics for example, from chemistry, from astrophysics, because behind these things is the human mind and therefore the musical mind also. So there is a common pool of all this fantastic knowledge, and capacity, and possibility, and technology is still behind the theoretical capacities of these fantastic human theoretical possibilities. I don't know in the future if the gap will decrease, but, with some delay, it will follow up, therefore music will be more and more provided with new tools to do that, but it has to widen its theoretical approach much more than it is today.

NB: This is difficult for most composers, though, is it not?

IX: Of course it is difficult. But their problem is that it is there. It is a mine of fantastic ways of living, mentally and also aesthetically, but you have to dig in to find the tools, the systems, to organize them, and this is tied together with the question "What is music, and what is it for? What is its role in society, and for man, the individual to start with, and therefore how the society could make use of music, as what?". As a manifestation of a creativity? That is a word which is very much used, therefore meaningless. I would say another word, which may be trivial but may be more sensible, the way of living, the freest way of living with the mind producing things which are not taken for direct production, for eating or for movement, but just for organization of your mind, and understanding, creating new forms. You can say exactly the same words for visual things of course. That is, for art!

NB: Let's talk about the future use of the computer. Do you think it is of critical importance?

IX: I think it is, yes. The new thing that computer technology is able to give to the individuals, not specialized people, but everybody, is that in ten years, everyone will be able to buy a computer of the size of an electronic calculator now, pocket size, but with all the capacities that huge computers have now, and more or less, at the same price. This means that everybody more or less fortunate will be able to acquire such a thing, if not the individual, at least a team of people. Well, if you are able to use such a thing, then you can produce not only the sounds, whatever sounds you wish, but also to think in creative ways about the composition itself, which was not possible before. A composer, before the computer, had to imagine things beforehand, and have it finally written, then performed. In order to do that, one had to really specialize.

This is why perhaps, music was so out of society, it slowly became outside of society as an expression of the creativity of man. But now, with these cheap tools, everybody will be able to approach this like painting. Everybody could write poetry, and there are many people that are able to write poetry. Today, many people do not write poetry because poetry itself traverses a crisis as a form of art or of language, but maybe more than ever people write things. It is easy, you have the paper and you write on it. But you couldn't do that with music the same way. But now, with the computers, you can do that without even being specialized.

Phlegra, for a mixed ensemble of 11 instruments (woodwinds, brass, strings), was composed in 1975. It was the first of four commissions for the London Sinfonietta, a remarkable collaboration that stretched to Xenakis's very last composition, *O-Mega*, completed in 1997. The title refers to the "battlefield where the Titans and the new gods of Olympus clashed." The music teems with energy, sustained textures being animated with accented articulations, dramatic dynamic swells, and microtonal ornamentation. Contrasting passages contain dense chordal or cluster voicings, fast melodic runs, glissandi of various kinds, and complex rhythmic pointillism. In his foreword to the score, the composer notes: "I have continued here the construction of textures and their organization on a higher level. I refer to texture in the general sense of form — Textures in the sense of form are the cornerstone of art and knowledge."

— James Harley

Échange, from 1989, is the only work Xenakis wrote to feature a woodwind soloist. In this case, the rich sound of the bass clarinet is set off by a mixed ensemble of woodwinds, brass, and strings. That same year, Xenakis also composed *Epicycle* for solo cello and ensemble. It's interesting to note that prior to these the only concertante works he wrote featured keyboard soloists (three works for piano and orchestra, and one for harpsichord and ensemble). In subsequent years, though, *Dox-Orkb* (violin and orchestra), *Troorkb* (trombone and orchestra), and *O-Mega* (percussion and ensemble) appeared. *Échange* was commissioned by Harry Sparnaay and the ASKO Ensemble of Holland. The music is in many ways rather traditional, featuring undulating melodic contours, and highlighting the sonorous tone of the low register of the bass clarinet supported by surprisingly harmonious textures in the ensemble.

— James Harley

Jalons, composed in 1986, was commissioned by Pierre Boulez to celebrate the 10th anniversary of l'Ensemble InterContemporain. For that same concert, Olivier Messiaen, mentor of both Xenakis and Boulez, contributed a new piece as well, his final work for solo piano, *Petites esquisses d'oiseaux*, performed by Yvonne Loriod. *Jalons* is one of just a few works Xenakis wrote that includes harp (*Alax*, for three ensembles each featuring a harp, was composed the year before), and its addition to the ensemble highlights the range of colours explored in this score. Other unusual sonorities include high woodwind multiphonics, and low growling textures featuring the contrabass clarinet and contrabassoon along with tuba and double bass. Delicate chamber passages are contrasted with massed textures.

— James Harley

"Freedman has an erotic character in performance that's smooth like honey and sharp like a bee sting, making any expedition with her worth taking." (Robert Everett Green, *Globe and Mail*). Conspicuously described as "a musical revolutionary", Lori Freedman is known internationally as one of Canada's most provocative and creative performers. Her work includes contemporary, improvised and electroacoustic music, with frequent collaborations with dance, theatre and visual artists. Over 30 composers have written solo bass clarinet music for her and her work has been recorded on 24 commercial CDs. Just prior to the release of *HUSKLESS!* (Artifact 20) she received the 1998 Freddie Stone Award for the "demonstration of outstanding leadership, integrity and excellence in the area of contemporary music and jazz". That debut CD won her the nomination of a Prairie Music Award, 2000 for the "Most Outstanding Classical Recording". The National Jazz Awards nominated her for Clarinetist of the Year 2003. Upcoming projects see Freedman performing with artists such as the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, the SMCQ, the ECM, New Music Concerts and Arraymusic of Toronto, Diane Labrosse, Wilbert de Joode, Jean Derome, Steve Lacy, François Houle and George Lewis. She is also preparing *There, in here* a solo performance and future recording project of works written by her and for her from Ana Sokolovic, Bradshaw Pack, Monique Jean, André Ristic, Jacquie Leggatt and Jean Derome.

James Harley, born 1959, Vernon, B.C., Canada, began studying composition in 1980. Prior to that, he had been active as a pianist, jazz and classical, played percussion, and also studied electroacoustics at Western Washington University. After graduating in 1982, he took up residence in the UK in order to study composition with Paul Patterson at the Royal Academy of Music. Recipient of grants from the Canada Council and the Leverhulme Trust, among others, Harley remained in London for three years, benefiting from a number of performances and prizes. In 1985, having been awarded the prestigious Mendelssohn Scholarship, which enables British composers to spend a period abroad, he moved to Paris. There, Harley studied aesthetics with Iannis Xenakis, musical acoustics at the Université de Paris, attended seminars at IRCAM and the Collège de France (Pierre Boulez), and worked extensively with Xenakis' UPIC computer music system at CEMAMu. While in Paris, Harley won a number of prizes, including two in the 1986 CBC Radio Young Composers Competition in Canada. In the fall of 1996, Harley moved to Los Angeles, and taught part-time at USC and the California Institute of the Arts. In 1999, he began teaching in Minnesota, directing the Music Technology program at Minnesota State University Moorhead. In 2002, he was awarded a McKnight Foundation Composition Fellowship. Harley is currently Assistant Professor at the College of Arts of the University of Guelph. As a researcher, Harley has written on various aspects of contemporary music; his book, *Xenakis: His Life in Music*, was published by Routledge in 2004.

James Harley

aXis (2006)

aXis is scored for 13 instruments: woodwinds, brass, and strings. It was commissioned by New Music Concerts, Toronto, for this concert celebrating the music of Iannis Xenakis, held as part of the *soundaXis* festival. The title is intended to pay homage both to Xenakis and to the festival. Beyond that, the title points to the way the music was conceived: various Xenakian ideas as "axis" — the center around which the music rotates; the basic rhythmic impulse that begins the piece, to be varied, elaborated, and returned to; the homophonic texture of the opening, evolving into independent instrumental groups, then individual instruments, then back again; the formal shape of the piece, turning around the point of departure. If there are explicit references to the soundworld of Xenakis, they come from his later work, from *Jonchates* (1977) and beyond. His music has influenced me greatly, but more, his rigor of thought and questioning of basic principles have challenged me to go my own way.

—James Harley

New Music Concerts

Robert Aitken, c.m., Artistic Director

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