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Iannis Xenakis – An Interview

The distinguished composer in conversation with ROBERT MATTHEW-WALKER

RMW: Although you are regarded as a Greek composer you were born, and lived the first ten years of your life, in Rumania. Do you remember those early years?

IX: No, not much at all.

RMW: Have you been back there?

IX: No – not since 1938; almost 50 years now.

RMW: So it really means very little to you.

IX: Right.

RMW: In which case, if you were asked to pinpoint your home, where would it be?

IX: I don't know; I'm living in Paris since many years now, and I've lived in the States for five years. Otherwise, in Greece, and I've travelled to many places – Japan, for instance, which I like very much. At least, I liked it before it became so much Americanised. But I don't feel as though I belong to a specific country.

RMW: But if your were pushed on that, if someone were to say to you where do you feel you come from, could you answer that?

IX: I would say Athens, 5th century, before Christ.

RMW: If you were able to travel in time, you would like to be there?

IX: I think so; up to a point, at least.

RMW: What is so special about that period for you?

IX: First of all, the quality of the art. Then this sudden, exploding growth of rational thought and poetry. The fact that there was so much in the way of new things, of constant discovery – although perhaps they didn't know that themselves at that time. There were discoveries. We don't know what went on there; I don't know exactly what happened at that time, nobody knows. We know from studies, from readings and what we see from sculpture, from architecture.

RMW: For all our knowledge of ancient art we can appreciate the surviving architecture, we can read the literature and poetry, we can perform the drama, but we have no way of knowing with any comparable degree of accuracy how the music was performed, or how

important in comparison it seemed to the ancients. In that way, music is a very recent development. Do you consciously attempt in your music to recreate the spirit of Athens around the 5th century B.C.? Or is your identification with that age something quite separate from your music?

IX: No, I don't think it is directly related to my music; it is indirectly related. You see, when I started writing the music, I have written for 30 years now, what pushed me to do that was not a specific training or some closed universe like Western music with the tradition of Romantic or modern serial techniques of that time. I felt myself in my work that I could have another way of saying it, based also on my own experience, my personal sound experience.

RMW: What decided you to become a composer?

IX: I wanted to do many things, archeology, philosophy, physics, astrophysics, and so on; well all these things in which I was interested – together with mathematics – and also I wanted to change society, that is politics, and finally after the experiences I had in my youth and the disasters, I thought that I was less unhappy in doing music.

RMW: Less unhappy?

IX: Yes, right. Had I done philosophy I would have been much more restless.

RMW: What was so pleasurable, comparatively, about music?

IX: It was not pleasurable.

RMW: Well, comparatively.

IX: Deeply I thought that it was my right place.

RMW: Is the pursuit of these less unhappy aspects of creativity more important to you, on a continuous basis, and do you still do any of these other things?

IX: I try to do all of these things still; for instance, mathematics or physics – which I was obliged to learn – as well as architecture also, or even some philosophy I found that through music I could live them again. [29]

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RMW: You must be aware that there are many musicians, many composers, who would say that what you attempt to do is very interesting, and certainly as far as you are concerned is very important, but to try to transfer architectural principles, for example, to music is impossible. What would you say to that?

IX: I think that they are wrong, because in music you can have all

of these things. In music you have rational thought and the creative, the aesthetic aspect. It cannot be otherwise. When you do music you find all of these other aspects together. Of course, it's not a transfer, that's the wrong way to put it, it's not saying well that this theorem, or that this routine in mathematics or physics is good for music – it has no meaning, there really is no necessity in music to think in the same way – then you're just doing some kind of monkey business. It is also something that is irrational and will fail, aesthetically and intellectually. The fact is that the human mind is behind whatever one is doing, whether it be physics, astrophysics, genetics, everything. Provided you find the bridges to the core of the things that exist in all these domains – they are the same, and the proof of that is that music in this millennium (these millennia) sometimes was ahead of mathematics for instance, the intellectual thinking. I can give you some precise examples, like for instance when in the tenth century the use of staves started it was the first attempt (maybe the second attempt, the first being the Alexandrian Carmerian) to link staves with sound; with staves it became much more precise, linking two dimensions that have nothing to do with space whatever – pitch and time – in a very precise way, and accurately. Geometry was discovered, invented, three centuries later by Horace and six centuries later by Indecart, so music was ahead really in this kind of intuitive concept of linking different qualities of spaces, because Indecartan geometry links three dimensional space, for instance. Now we can use time, also, came much later than the musicians did it. Another example is that when in the Renaissance musicians discovered that they use a melodic pattern backwards or inverse, or inverse backwards – these forms of treating a melodic pattern, which means a musical identity, in order to amplify it, producing four forms of it. These four forms one can think of as being transformations which form a group. The group theorem was formed in the 19th century by Galois, a French mathematician, and now it is a basic thing, not only to describe the symmetries of crystals but also to describe nuclear particles, by the symmetry of their behaviour. So the musicians were ahead – although they didn't know what they were doing, of course.

RMW: Is it true to say that in your music you do not attempt to create something which is the musical equivalent of these other disciplines?

IX: No, absolutely not.

RMW: It is, simply, that you bring to music the discipline of thought and the discipline of creativity that applies to anything else you do, no matter what it is?

IX: Absolutely right, yes.

RMW: It still remains music.

IX: It should remain music.

RMW: – first and foremost. But there will be some people who will

say that might well be true Mr Xenakis but looking at a list of your compositions, the titles of them imply something different. You don't write a symphony or a concerto or a violin sonata; people who go to concerts will sit there and say – what does this mean? – and they're referring to the title.

IX: I've spoken too much about some theoretical aspects, but of course my music is not only based on these things. They are only part of it. There are other parts of my music that cannot be spoken of – there are no notions, there are no words, to describe my music. And the same is true of other music – if you take very complex music of the 19th century, how do you describe it unless you take the Conservatory or traditional musical way to describe it, which is often not even description, it is just photographic. In many ways there are no intellectual tools with which to approach that complex intellectual and emotional thing which is art. I could say the same things about Indian music, or African music, or Medieval music – for me, one of the most interesting composers is Dunstable. I like his music very much, for he has something of the aesthetics which is at the head of universal musical achievement. But you can't approach that by saying 'there is that kind of counterpoint, that kind of melodic pattern or space or so on. How can you express in words the things that make Dunstable so important in music? That is aesthetics.

RMW: The listener has to start somewhere. The person coming to hear your music for the first time, who is unaware of your approach to composition and the inter-relationship of all of these things, would you try to help him through a programme-note or whatever, to enter into your world or would you just say to him let the music flow over you and see what happens?

IX: I would say that today, but I would not have said it a few years ago. The only thing I would ask of him is to have his mind and ears naive, like a child, try not to bring any preconceptions – to listen to forms and transformations, and not concern himself with orchestration or counterpoint.

RMW: Which of your works do you look back on and like very much?

IX: I don't like any of my works very much – there are times when I like some, and others when I don't like the same work. I can say I am contented with that work because it was original or something different. Whilst I am writing music I try not to imitate myself or someone else – that I think is very important.

RMW: What are you writing at the moment?

IX: A big orchestral work for Japan. I've done about six or seven minutes, but I don't know how long it will be, I cannot say when it will end.

RMW: Does that imply that your music is a continuous process?

IX: Right. I think so. I can't escape from the past – and I'm against that. I would like to be absolutely new every time: I thought this was possible, but now I know it is impossible. I find as I get older that I need few complications in my music. I find it is a simplification but it has to be that way. When I write music it is for myself, and not for a specific audience, because then I'm less free – and freedom is very important for me, freedom from the environment, freedom from your own self. That's the very interesting thing in life. I think.

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CORRECTIONS:

early year -> early years

dont' -> don't

pleasureable -> pleasurable

millenium -> millennium

millenia -> millennia