

The Harmonies of Nature

Yannis Xenakis, 67, is one of the most performed and recorded contemporary composers. Also an architect, he heads a research center for music in Paris. Recently, NEWSWEEK'S Benjamin Ivry spoke with him in his Pigalle apartment:

IVRY: Your status in Greece has changed over the years from having been condemned to death as a terrorist to being proclaimed a "national hero."

XENAKIS: In Greece we all had high hopes for Papandreu, but as the years went by, nothing happened. I am glad to see the three-party consensus ruling Greece, but much time has been lost. For me, Greece is the beauty of nature. I go there in summer for kayak trips with my wife and daughter and her dog. In the sun and sea, I find Ulysses again, the poor guy who only wanted to go home.

You fought against the Germans and British in Athens in the 1940s.

The street fights were a real spectacle, not to mention the British bombing of Greek airports. And the sounds of massive demonstrations. One hundred thousand people in the streets as in East Germany today. We started in little groups, singing songs and chanting slogans, and arrived at the plazas where Germans waited with machine guns. Many people died. The songs, the cries of the dying, the machine guns---an amazing music.

Before a British shell exploded in your face, you single-handedly destroyed two tanks with Molotov cocktails.

When I recovered, I wanted to go to America, to study geology, mathematics, archeology, music, astrophysics and chemistry. But I went to Paris, where I began to compose. I saw Nadia Boulanger, who said she was too old to teach me---she was only 60 then, and lived to be 94! I looked for a mentor and found the conductor Hermann Scherchen, who told me, "You write music that doesn't come from other music."

You worked for 12 years with the architect Le Corbusier.

I contributed to La Tourette Monastery, the High Court at Chandigarh and other projects. Le Corbusier was rather distant, although we had office parties where he would make cold little jokes. He liked to make ironic comments about Frank Lloyd Wright. I left him because he would not give me any credit for doing all the work on the Philips Pavilion. I didn't want money, just the authorship. He said, "What have you invented here? These forms have always existed." So I said, "You wrote a whole book on right angles, which have always existed, too." I wouldn't let Le Corbusier devour me, as he did some other young architects.

Le Corbusier was unmusical.

His mother played Bach on the piano all day and night, which bothered him. He said that Schoenberg and Stravinsky were "bombastic." But he liked Varèse. Le Corbusier invited Varèse and me to lunch, and told Varèse, "You know, I invented your kind of music, calling it preserved music." On the way out Varèse told me, "You realize what gall Le Corbusier has, claiming to have invented my system of organized sounds!"

How do you feel about Paris's new architecture?

The Musée d'Orsay is both disgusting and Roman. The Louvre Pyramid would have been better if it were five meters lower, or else a whole lot higher. And maybe triangular instead of four-sided; that would have been more challenging. The Pompidou Center is a failed oil refinery, with a blind side facing a busy street, really valueless architecture. And Ricardo Bofill, who has designed the cathedral at Evry, should be put on trial as a criminal, or maybe his fate should be left up to Michel Tournier.

And the Bastille Opera?

Completely stupid and vastly outdated. The whole idea of building an opera house was bad. We have one already, the Palais Garnier. The huge sums of money would have been better spent on musical research and local orchestras. In the old days, princess with good taste were patrons. Now politicians want their names to survive on buildings like the Pompidou Center or the Mitterrand Center. They are princes, but tasteless ones.

Does Pierre Boulez control too much of French music?

Boulez and I are sibling rivals. Boulez is very intelligent and talented, and knows how to get a lot of money from the state for music. His musical research center, IRCAM, got 40 million francs last year, while mine got 2 million francs. Ten years ago I said that Boulez's organization received too much for what it produced, but I don't think that will change. At IRCAM, guest composers come from America and elsewhere, work in their corners and then go home, with no exchange of ideas. A little while ago, when other composers were leaving Boulez, he called me and said we should collaborate. I gave him some advice, then asked if my research center could get some more money. He said, "Oh, no." Some collaboration! Boulez prefers to remain alone, as before.

What would you do with extra money?

For 20 years I [have] wanted to begin research on musical quanta, based on an idea of Albert Einstein's. Large computers are required but we cannot afford them. Instead, composers in Canada and the United States are carrying out the project. And I am fascinated by the fractal geometry of Benoit Mandelbrot, which finds mathematical form in seemingly random patterns of nature. That, too, could be a basis for musical composition. Ever since Heraclitus, mathematics and music have been united as part of nature.

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[52] Yannis Xenakis, Cartier-Bresson-Magnum [52]