

Xenakis and the Echoes of War

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Abstract: *Iannis Xenakis was among those European artists whose youth was overshadowed by the Second World War. He is a prominent example of a composer being for his lifetime influenced and determined in his character and musical work by experiences of barbaric dictatorship, ideological terror, and military destruction. And these experiences became transformed into the semantics of his musical compositions.*

Key-words: *Iannis Xenakis, “Diamorphoses”, “Nuits”, “Pour la paix”, “Bohor”, semantics of music, war, nuclear escalation.*

In these days, mankind is reminded again that war influences life drastically. When the Russian despot Vladimir Putin started the bloody invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, the fundamentals of a peaceful coexistence between the European Union and their neighbour states were destroyed. Almost every seemingly stable aspect of human life and culture within the Western-orientated democratic nations was shaken; the normal daily routine and economic conditions of every citizen outside and especially inside Ukraine, whether young or old, have been changed. And they will never be the same as they were before.

Looking back to the past period of the Second World War, in a similar, but even more extreme way Iannis Xenakis was among those European artists whose youth was overshadowed by ideological terror and military destruction. From this point of view, he is a prominent example of a composer being for his lifetime influenced and determined in his character and musical work by experiences of barbaric dictatorship and war; similar to other quite well-known composers of the same generation like Pierre Henry, Luciano Berio, Luigi Nono, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Henri Pousseur, Mauricio Kagel, and György Ligeti, to name just a few.

In several interviews since 1966, Xenakis himself frankly answered different questions concerning this biographical background (for instance: Bois 1966, Varga 1996): Offering active resistance against the German invasion into Greece in April 1941, fighting against the British intervention in the streets of Athens at the end of

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1944, resulting in the severe damage to his face and his hearing on January 1st, 1945, down to his perilous emigration to France in November 1947. And Xenakis quite often concluded that these occurrences had become transformed into the semantics of his musical compositions. On one hand, he used to quote his wife, who in general would compare his music with wars. And on the other hand, he gave the concrete example how the experience of a violent political demonstration had led him to the idea of stochastic processes; in his fundamental theoretical publication *Musiques formelles* (1963), he explained this special aesthetical transcription very clear in detail: „Everyone has observed the sonic phenomena of a political crowd of dozens or hundreds of thousands of people. The human river shouts a slogan in a uniform rhythm. Then another slogan springs from the head of the demonstration; it spreads towards the tail, replacing the first. A wave of transition thus passes from the head to the tail. The clamor fills the city, and the inhibiting force of voice and rhythm reaches a climax. It is an event of great power and beauty in its ferocity. Then the impact between the demonstrators and the enemy occurs. The perfect rhythm of the last slogan breaks up in a huge cluster of chaotic shouts, which also spreads to the tail. Imagine, in addition, the reports of dozens of machine guns and the whistle of bullets adding their punctuations to this total disorder. The crowd is then rapidly dispersed, and after sonic and visual hell follows a detonating calm, full of despair, dust, and death. The statistical laws of these events, separated from their political or moral context, are the same as those of the cicadas or the rain. They are the laws of the passage from complete order to total disorder in a continuous or explosive manner. They are stochastic laws.“ (Xenakis 1971, 9).

According to such explicit verbal statements, one can detect indirect, scarcely hidden acoustic echoes of war already in Xenakis' earliest works. For instance, right in the beginning of the electro acoustic composition *Diamorphoses* (1957-58), percussive sounds of an earthquake as well as the rising siren-glissando of a jet-plane can be heard which may be interpreted as metaphorical semantic indications of a fundamental shaking of the world and of hostile military aggression. Such atmosphere of conflict is continued within the following passages of the composition by frequently occurring heavy explosions and alarming glissandi, before the music sinks down into a dense mixture of detonations and sharp noise-sounds, thus annihilating almost every recognizable particularity. Probably for every listener of Xenakis' oeuvre, it will not be hard to find similar musical representations of unbridled power and destruction in his other instrumental, vocal or orchestral works, appearing in heavy sound masses, traces of missiles, various acoustic eruptions, and final extinguishment (as it will be discussed later guided by another example).

More than that, one impressive paradigm of a composition which Xenakis obviously intended as a direct political statement may be mentioned here, dating into the year 1967, after a military riot had taken place in Greece on April 21st: the choir a cappella *Nuits* for twelve mixed singers (three of each sopranos, altos, tenors, basses). The title does not indicate – as one could expect at first glance – a magical, peaceful atmosphere, but in contrary the loneliness and desperation of political victims in dark prisons during nights of fright, torture and death; in the preface of the score, the work is dedicated to four explicitly named „unknown political prisoners“ under the former post-Second World War Spanish, Greek and Portuguese dictatorships (Narcisso Julian, Costas Philinis and Eli Erythriadou, and Joachim Amaro) „and thousands of forgotten ones whose very names are lost“ (1999, s.p.). But even independent of this dedication, the quarter-tone structured vocal music, despite not being based on a concrete text but on semantically abstract old Sumerian and Persian phonemes, is transmitting human suffering and depression in an extreme intensity. High and shrill, fortississimo articulated soprano-cries open the composition, followed by a dark sequence of lamenting basses. And with one of his typical glissando culminations, Xenakis evokes right from the beginning the aural impression that each of the singers has to fight desperately for survival. After other long, agonizing events full of chromatic despair and sinister noises, the music ends with a symbolic movement downwards into a morendo tremolo in unison of the basses, punctuated by a short, dry cough, which prisoners can get in cold and wet dungeons.

However, it should not be denied, that political engagement in the arts sometimes may run the risk of lacking aesthetic quality, as was the case fifteen years later with Xenakis' manifesto *Pour la paix* (1982) for mixed choir, speaker and tape. Composed on a text written by his wife Françoise – who had been a member of the French resistance during the German occupation and therefore sharing a similar biographical background – the dramatic idea unfolds a tragedy of antique Greek dimensions. And without any doubt, the poetic intention is noble and implies a completely justified true critic of the deathly consequences of ideological misuse, as Xenakis stated in general before summarizing the content of the text: „The human being is an unconscious prisoner of the ideologies and beliefs of society and the State who use him as a blind pawn in their machinery ever so destructive of lives and destinies. The nostalgia to [recte: of] two childhood friends [who have] become soldiers in enemy camps. How insignificant one feels faced with the atrocities of incessant wars, of all that useless suffering. But the size of their memory do not prevent them from flying to their deaths.“ (Preface of the score 1994, s.p.). Nevertheless, the sequences of the mixed choir Xenakis interpolated, „either accompanied or separated by sonorous events composed on the UPIC and recorded

on stereo tape“, seem quite poor in their musical substance and cannot stand the comparison with the aesthetic perfection of the masterpiece *Nuits* and its strong and immediate emotional effects, which hardly any listener is able to escape.

From a musicological point of view, even more interesting than the examples presented thus far is the implicit echo of a martial reality found in Xenakis' famous electro acoustic composition *Bohor*, realized in Paris at the studios of Pierre Schaeffer's Groupe de Recherches Musicales at the end of the year 1962. Without question, it is one of the most ferocious works within this domain, comprising all the above-mentioned musical aspects of violence in an extreme shape. Whilst the title in a certain manner of self-identification alludes to the knight in the saga of King Arthur, recognizable by a scarf covering his face, and thus designates already a sphere of struggle, the electro acoustic music is performed via eight loudspeakers surrounding the audience and – as Xenakis recommended – with the highest possible volume, in complete darkness.

The antagonistic tension between a disturbing deep grumbling *ostinato* on one hand, which is the sonorous basis of *Bohor*, and painful higher metallic sound events on the other hand, sometimes suggestive of the clashing of swords, constitutes a completely catastrophic situation, a fundamental struggle for life. And the listener is included in it not only in a metaphoric mode, but also concretely and physically with his own body, and he may feel directly threatened in his existence, or at least be afraid of the damage of his ears. Sounds of alarm-bells from the beginning develop during the following minutes into dense masses which become continually sharpened to an increasing, ear-deafening loudness. Other disastrous noises like detonations of bullets and exploding objects are added, and one hears (or hallucinates) single human cries of pain within this chaos of destruction. During the last five minutes of the composition, the tendency toward distortion becomes dominating, while constantly stronger compressed noise-complexes culminate in extreme dynamics and the blows of a terrible acoustic fog, which poisons the air of the whole auditorium.

Suddenly the music breaks off, and the listener is left completely stunned, as if he just escaped from hell. The literally overwhelming effect of *Bohor* is hard to describe in words; it has to be experienced in an original eight-channel multiphonic performance. Because Xenakis enhanced the mimetic potential of the electroacoustic medium to a maximum degree by organizing a perilous conflict directly in the concert hall. But the question remains – and it is quite astonishing that hardly anybody has asked it before – what motivated him to create such shocking music?

To find an answer it is necessary to look back at the former historic reality by taking into consideration the constitution of the world during the process of

composition. As in the second half of October 1962, it was the time of the so called Cuban Missile Crisis, which brought mankind quite near to the outbreak of the Third World War through the catastrophic possibility of an atomic struggle between Soviet Russia and the United States of America. Indeed, till now the exact day on which Xenakis began composing *Bohor* in the studios of the Groupe de Recherches Musicales seems unclear, but it is documented in the chronological list of works to have been the last production within the year 1962; the first performance took place in Paris at the Salle des Conservatoires on December 15th, 1962.

Thus it can be taken for granted that Xenakis realized *Bohor* under the disturbing impression of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when, during the span of one week, millions of people all over the world were trembling in fear of a possible nuclear escalation between the two super-powers, which both had set their armies on highest alert. Whether Xenakis had started the electroacoustic realization of *Bohor* just in October 1962, earlier or even later – what seems technically improbable –, is not decisive concerning the fact that an evident connexion between the historical apocalyptic perspective and the musical composition can be recognized, or in other words: has to be emphasized, if one is aware of Xenakis' special sensitivity to extreme existential situations like deathly menace by military power. A person like him, who had to suffer extreme fighting in his youth, was absolutely unable to ignore this breathtaking confrontation, but clearly had to react also in his artistic work.

Therefore *Bohor* serves as a paradigm of the immediate electroacoustic reflection of a very concrete historic moment. It is a deeply bewildering musical warning against the imminent disaster of the irreversible annihilation of all life on planet earth, and likewise an echo of mankind's desperate fear of ruin by an universal atomic fire. This is expressed by the almost unbearable dynamic climax of *Bohor* culminating in the all-destroying final noise, which serves as an acoustic metaphor for the devastating nuclear radiation; and after the abrupt end of the music, only an infinite dark vacuum is left over.

It is not hard to imagine that Xenakis, in consequence of his personal experiences of war, was completely aware of the explosive situation in October 1962 and would have followed every single news item about the events around the island of Cuba with special interest, and probably not without emotional agitation. Whereas from today's point of view it seems quite astonishing that there is no evidence that the audience during the premiere on December 15th felt any connection between the disturbing music performance and the deadly danger which mankind only some weeks ago had survived. Even Pierre Schaeffer, who in his theoretical statements quite often postulated a close relation between the creative activities of a composer or other artist and the actual social and political

reality, perceived *Bohor* only as an isolated aesthetical process which certainly repelled him; calling the work an ‚enormous crackling‘ comparable with an ‚injuring accumulation of lancet-cuts into the ear‘ (see Schaeffer 1981, 85), at least he obviously had understood the provocative and violent character of the music quite well. Indeed, the majority of listeners during the concert apparently had forgotten the cruel everyday reality, what may have resulted from a strange mixture of psychic repression and aesthetic escapism which not infrequently dominates human behaviour. And sometimes only with greater chronological distance do certain happenings become completely transparent with all their inherent semantic dimensions, which had previously been imperceptible to their overwhelmed contemporary witnesses.

On the other hand – as it has already been pointed out above – one can be sure that Xenakis with full consciousness reacted against the terrible threat in his present with *Bohor* as an explicit musical warning. Because he was motivated by the conviction that it was his permanent task and moral obligation to stand up for peace and freedom worldwide; Xenakis believed in the possibility that music could improve the conditions of human life, and by the way, shared this idealism with colleagues of his generation who also had experienced the terror of the Second World War (even if not all of them later became his closest friends). And thus in a general sense one has to draw a line from the Cuban Missile Crisis in the 1960s to nowadays, as Putin’s obsolete ideology of a great Russian empire, his unending lies, infamous propaganda and nuclear menace, and yet another Russian military aggression with barbaric crimes against the civilian population have caused a comparable turning point in the history of the early 21st century. It is a depressing statement, but one must emphasize: *Bohor* has maintained a vital political actuality up to this very day.

References

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