

# Exploring Xenakis

Performance, Practice, Philosophy

Edited by

**Alfia Nakipbekova**

University of Leeds, UK

**Series in Music**



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# Introduction

Alfia Nakipbekova

Iannis Xenakis (1922-2001) is universally recognised as one of the most significant and influential musicians of the twentieth century. His artistic output and its enormous impact on musical philosophy, compositional methods, sound and instrumental techniques has drawn considerable attention from numerous researchers and an array of committed performers, whose work interweaves and cross-pollinates within the multiple spectra of the richly patterned fabric of Xenakis's universe.

Xenakian studies have been developing since the mid-1960s consisting of multi-faceted contributions and approaches expounded in monographs, journal articles and PhD dissertations;<sup>1</sup> this field is continuing to expand with new theoretical insights and practical experiences from a diverse community of international musicologists, mathematicians, philosophers and performers.<sup>2</sup> Integral to this growth, the gatherings of dedicated researchers at conferences and symposia devoted to Xenakis's legacy play an important role as the dynamic junctures within this momentum. Such opportunities to

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<sup>1</sup> As noted by the editor Makis Solomos in the Introduction to *Présences de/Presences of Iannis Xenakis*. 2001, 3. Paris: Centre de documentation de la musique contemporaine. For the complete annotated bibliographies compiled and commented by Makis Solomos, see the appendix of *Présences de/Presences of Iannis Xenakis*, and 'The Friends of Iannis Xenakis Association', online <http://www.iannis-xenakis.org/xen/read/biblio.html>

<sup>2</sup> Recent studies have included: *Iannis Xenakis, La musique électroacoustique / The Electroacoustic Music, Musique-philosophie*. 2015, edited by Makis Solomos. Paris: L'Harmattan; Margarethe Maierhofer-Lischka, 2017. 'Approaching the Liminal in the Performance of Iannis Xenakis' Instrumental Solo Works'. *ÍMPAR Journal for Artistic Research*, 1(2): 45-53; J. Janković-Beguš, 2016. 'Playing the Game with Aleatorics and Narrativity: Linaia-Agon by Iannis Xenakis.' *New Sound, International Journal of Music*, 48 (2): 109-130; Maia Sigua, 2016. 'Oresteia by Iannis Xenakis: A New Solution to a 400-Year-Old Problem'. In *Music on Stage 2*, edited by Luis Campos and Fiona Jane Schopf. Cambridge Scholars Publishing; Christian Utz, 2016. 'Time-Space Experience in Works for Solo Cello by Lachenmann, Xenakis and Ferneyhough: a Performance-Sensitive Approach to Morphosyntactic Musical Analysis'. *Music Analysis*, 36 (2): 216-256. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/musa.12076>

discuss and evaluate the latest findings and projects-in-progress render long-term ramifications.

One of the most significant publications reflecting this important part in Xenakian studies is the book *Présences de/Presences of Iannis Xenakis* (2001) comprised of the proceedings of the first ever symposium devoted solely to Xenakis, ‘Presences of Iannis Xenakis’.<sup>3</sup> The research papers from the two consequential events that followed – ‘Symposium Iannis Xenakis’, Athens, May 2005 and ‘Xenakis International Symposium’, London, April, 2011 – are also available.<sup>4</sup> The range of the topics and approaches in these publications is astonishingly broad and vibrant: from theoretical analyses to increasingly diverging philosophical, aesthetical and interdisciplinary paths towards the heart of Xenakis’s creative source. Makis Solomos’ words, written almost two decades ago, are still relevant today:

*“The time has come to rectify (while not necessarily erasing) the image that continues to dominate: the image of a composer-“mathematician”. Xenakis has defined himself only as a “user of mathematics” [...] His music itself is far from generalizing any formalization.” (Présences de/Presences of Iannis Xenakis, 2001, 4)*

Continuing the tradition of sharing manifold theoretical and practical perspectives and paths in Xenakian studies, this book consists of selected papers presented at the Symposium ‘Exploring Xenakis: Performance, Practice, Philosophy’ (Leeds, 2017).<sup>5</sup> The one-day Symposium brought together scholars from the UK, France, Japan, Australia, Belgium, Portugal, the Netherlands and Brazil. Compared to the Symposium proceedings mentioned above, the scope of this book is circumscribed by the scale of the event; the resulting articles, however, reflect a variety of research questions encompassing Xenakis’s compositional methods, reflections on performance, and the composer’s ideological position with regard to the avant-garde. The

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<sup>3</sup>The Symposium took place on 29-30 January 1998 at the Centre de Documentation de la Musique Contemporaine (CDMC) and Radio France, Paris.

<sup>4</sup> *International Symposium Iannis Xenakis: conference proceedings: Athens 18-20 May 2005 Greece*, edited by Anastasia Georgaki and Makis Solomos. Panepistēmio Athēnōn [Athens]: National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, 2005; *Xenakis Programme Details*, Goldsmith, University of London, 2011, edited by Dimitris Exarchos. Online <https://www.gold.ac.uk/cmru/xenakis-international-symposium/programme/>

<sup>5</sup>The Symposium took place on 12 September 2017 at the School of Music, University of Leeds, supported by the RAM (the Royal Musical Association). The keynote lectures were given by Dr. Makis Solomos and Dr. Benoît Gibson.

chapters are arranged in three parts: 'Xenakis and the avant-garde', 'Compositional practice', and 'Performance'. The main works examined here are *Metastaseis* (1953-54), *Gmeeoorh* (1974), *Herma* (1961), *Légende d'Eer* (1978), *Bohor* (1962) and *Nomos alpha* (1966).

In Part I, Xenakis's relationship with the avant-garde is explored – Alannah Marie Halay and Michael D. Atkinson investigate the significance of Xenakis's creative force in the rumbustious atmosphere of Paris in May 1968, elucidating 'how Xenakis and those like him became central to the revolutionary consciousness of the day, and what it is about Xenakis's practice that paradoxically disavows such possibilities.' (See chapter one, p. 3).

In Atkinson's words, 'Xenakis's work is placed in the context of its reception and 'canonicity' today, and questions whether such instantiation and acceptance manages to undermine that which was once so 'active'.'

In Part II, various aspects of Xenakis's compositional style and technique are discussed – some of the mathematical procedures employed in his works and the resulting sonorities and textures, as well as the processes involved in the composer's search for authentic expression. Part II opens with the chapter that focuses on Xenakis's middle-period style (1961-1973) from the perspective of Xenakis's compositional development. Dimitris Exarchos examines sketches and hand-written calculations made in the early 1960s in Berlin, when the composer was searching and refining his philosophical concepts and compositional techniques; this significant juncture is denoted by the composer's discovery of the outside-time structures that enabled him to develop a generalised metatheory of composition. The focus of this chapter is the genesis of these ideas on the mathematical level and their musical applications in the following decades (although the author also re-interprets Xenakis's earlier work accordingly). Taking as the case study the only work composed by Xenakis for organ, *Gmeeoorh* (1974), Marina Sudo scrutinises the factors that determine the degree and quality of densities and complexities of sound masses created by using 'a variety of timbres in combination with textural writing based upon linear arborescences'. (See chapter three, p. 39). As defined by Sudo, the paper 'aims to describe the structure of the different levels of sound mass, focusing on the following questions: which factors determine the quality of each sonic event, how do they interact, and how are the different types of cluster stratified? In addition to the analysis of the published score, an aural analysis of recordings of *Gmeeoorh*, informed by the *spectromorphological* approach originally derived from Schaeffer's concept of "l'écoute réduite [reductive listening]", is presented.' In chapter four 'On *Herma*', Benoît Gibson offers new insights into the structure and sound of this early work for piano and relationship between *Herma* and one of the earlier pieces *Achorripsis* (1957). A wide range of

questions is examined – from compositional concerns, such as classes of pitches, structure, graphic representation and stochastic distribution, to the problematic of editions and recording. Gibson includes a detailed overview of the commercially issued recordings of *Herma*, comparing and discussing the issues of the interpretative approaches in some of the recordings. The notion of *precision* in realisation of *Herma* is relevant to other instrumentalists, as each interpreter must confront the task of achieving a distinctive balance of the elements (pitches, densities, dynamics, etc.) within the complexity of a particular Xenakis's composition.

The subject of performing Xenakis's music is richly illuminated in *Performing Xenakis* (2010),<sup>6</sup> an important publication that draws together the experiences and reflections on interpretation and techniques directly from distinguished performers. In Part III of this book, the authors approach the performative aspect in Xenakis's music from three singular perspectives: as a 'secret' element in some of Xenakis's electroacoustic compositions; the interdisciplinary exploration of the sonority, structure and cinematic allusions (with reference to the Russian cinematographer Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*, 1979) evoked through the process of internalising *Nomos alpha*; and the exploration of the possible interpretative and technical solutions involved in performing and recording of the piece – one of the most complex and rewarding compositions for solo cello – demonstrated through analysing and comparing the selected recordings. In chapter five, Reinhold Friedl examines the rarely mentioned hidden performative aspects of Xenakis's electroacoustic music: not the performance *of* his electroacoustic music but the performances *for* his electroacoustic music. His detailed exposition of the recorded material and its background re-emphasises the uniqueness of Xenakian textures. By examining the recordings of *La Légende d'Eer* (1978) and *Bohor* (1962), Friedl argues the possibility of the unnamed performers being involved in creating the body of intermeshed electronic and live sound. *Nomos alpha* is the focus of the following two chapters. Chapter six conveys cellist Alfia Nakipbekova's personal experience of mastering *Nomos alpha*. (To listen to the recording of *Nomos alpha* by Alfia Nakipbekova see link <https://soundcloud.com/alfianakipbekova/iannis-xenakis-nomos-alpha>). Although the work has been thoroughly analysed in terms of Xenakis's use of mathematical procedures in organising the compositional material, a close exploration of the work's interdisciplinary and philosophical aspects from the performer's subjective viewpoint (termed as the Associative Method), has not been previously undertaken. As outlined in the

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<sup>6</sup> *Performing Xenakis*, 2010. Translated, compiled and edited by Sharon Kanach. Hillsdale, New York: Pendragon Press.

chapter, the arduous process of striving to unravel the essence of Xenakian expression while engaging with the challenges of the new physicality, engenders the moments of insights, a recurring state of clarity in which the composition is perceived as a 'window', the opening toward the expanses of the totality of Xenakian musical megacosm. At these moments, *Nomos alpha* is transformed from the singularity of a 'difficult' piece for cello into a catalyst for reaching new knowledge in the realm of expression and philosophy of performance. In chapter seven, Makis Solomos considers the subject of performance in recorded versions of *Nomos alpha* 'which has still been little investigated', (See chapter seven, p. 110) tracing the development of the work's performance tradition over three generations of cellists: from Siegfried Palm (who premiered the piece), Pierre Penassou and Rohan de Saram, to the 'second generation' – Pierre Strauch, Christophe Roy and Arne Deforce; among the 'third generation' of *Nomos alpha* cellists he includes Martina Schucan, Moritz Müllenbach and Alfia Nakipbekova. Solomos' close perusal of the recordings of *Nomos alpha* by Roy and Deforce reveals the potentialities in developing the interpretative space through comparing the two versions from 'specifically Xenakian aspects', such as 'sound, energy, gestuality', identifying these two approaches to interpretation as *chthonic* and *cosmic*. The chapter includes excerpts from Solomos' interviews with the two musicians – these lively discussions generate as many questions as they offer personal insights and practical experiences by the performers.

This chapter, dedicated to the evaluation of conceptual and expressive depths confronting the interpreters of Xenakis's music, concludes the book as an invitation to further research in the developing performance practice area within the fertile terrain of Xenakis's music – the source of bountiful vitality and potential for limitless proliferation across disciplines, cultures and paths to knowledge.

### References

*Présences de/Presences of Iannis Xenakis*. 2001, edited by Makis Solomos. Paris, Centre de documentation de la musique contemporaine.

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(Goldsmiths, University of London), Reinhold Friedl (Goldsmiths, University of London), Dr. Benoît Gibson (University of Évora), Dr. Alannah Halay (University of Leeds), Nikos Ioakeim (independent researcher), Dr. Yuko Ohara (Senzoku Gakuen College of Music, Japan), Marléné Radice (Sir Zelman Cowan School of Music, Monash University), Prof. Makis Solomos (Université Paris 8), Marina Sudo, University of Leuven.

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### Biographies

**Dr. Alannah Marie Halay** (AFHEA) is an academic researcher, composer and sound artist. After completing her PhD (*Recognising Absurdity through Compositional Practice: Comparing an Avant-Garde Style with being avant garde*) in 2016, she worked as a Research Fellow in the Leeds Humanities Research Institute, and a visiting lecturer at the University of Leeds. As well as performing her own music as a multi-instrumentalist and improviser, her music has been performed in Denmark, England, the Netherlands, and Poland; in events such as the Gaudeamus Muziekweek Festival and the 'Leeds Liedert+' song festival; by ensembles such as Notes Inégales, Trio Layers, Bloomsbury Opera, percussion ensembles of the Musikhochschule Freiburg and the University of Leeds, the Yorkshire Young Sinfonia, and others. She was the first winner of the Yorkshire Young Sinfonia Composition Competition in 2015, and her music has been selected for the Gaudeamus Muziekweek Academy. Most recently, she collaborated with the School of Music at the University of Leeds on a composition for 28 Steinway pianos. The project celebrated the School of Music becoming a Steinway School. Alannah is also the founder and organiser of the international *(Per)Forming Art* Symposium. She is also editor and co-author of the book *(Per)Forming Art: Performance as Research in Contemporary Artworks*. Alannah has also worked as a journalist, having written articles about conferences and music festivals for the Royal Musical Association and *Sounds Like Now: Contemporary Music News*.

**Michael Atkinson** is a critical theorist from Rochdale, England. He studied for his English degree at Sheffield Hallam University, receiving a First Class Honours, before graduating with the same for his Master's degree in Critical & Cultural Theory from the University of Leeds. His work has been published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing and WRoCaH amongst others. In addition to theory, Michael takes part in performance art, having performed in several Slam Poetry events during his time at Sheffield University. With a particular interest in

dialectics and Western Marxism, Mike follows the teachings of a wide array of thinkers, and has written on topics as diverse as the Uncanny, the 'absurd', *Oliver Twist*, *Doctor Who*, the commodification of nostalgia, and the anxiety and sense of guilt experienced by those of us who aren't engaged in manual labour.

**Dr. Dimitris Exarchos** is a theorist and musicologist specializing in contemporary music. He has published in books and journals on twentieth-century composition, theory, and analysis. He has delivered talks in the UK and abroad, organised symposia (Xenakis International Symposium; Notation in Contemporary Music; Compositional Aesthetics and the Political) and curated concerts and events (Southbank Centre, Goldsmiths, Migrant Sound). His research explores the themes of temporality, notation, and materialism, on the intersections between philosophy, aesthetics, analysis, and composition; his analytical work includes computational and mathematical approaches. He is currently Visiting Research Fellow at the Contemporary Music Research Unit, Goldsmiths.

**Marina Sudo** completed her first degree and master's in musicology at the Tokyo University of the Arts. In 2015, supported by the award of a stipend by the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel, she conducted a study of the manuscript sketches and scores held in their Pierre Boulez collection. She is currently a PhD student in musicology at the University of Leuven. In her PhD project, she seeks to explore the constructive potential of 'noise' in contemporary musical practice, the analytical focus being on works by Xenakis, Lachenmann, Ablinger and Merzbow.

**Dr. Benoît Gibson** studied viola, musical analysis and music theory at the Conservatoire de Musique de Montreal in Canada. He then moved to Paris (France) where he completed his PhD on the music of Iannis Xenakis at the École de hautes études en sciences sociales. Between 2000 and 2007, he worked at the Lisbon School of Music (Escola Superior de Música de Lisboa) in Portugal. He is presently teaching musical analysis at the University of Évora (Portugal) where, between 2008 and 2014, he directed the Centre for Research in Music and Musicology (Unidade de Investigação em Música e Musicologia – UnIMeM). During that period, he also worked on the critical edition of Iannis Xenakis's writings in collaboration with Makis Solomos and Sharon Kanach. The publication of his book *The Instrumental Music of Iannis Xenakis. Theory, Practice, Self-Borrowing* (2011) has been widely recognised as a major contribution to the understanding of the composer's creative thinking.

**Reinhold Friedl** studied mathematics in Stuttgart and Berlin, piano with Renate Werner, Alan Marks and Alexander von Schlippenbach, composition with Mario Bertoncini and Witold Szalonek. Reinhold is a composer and performer, director of the ensemble Zeitkratzer. He has received commissions from Wiener Festwochen, BBC London, the French state, Berliner Festspiele, ZKM, etc., and has written numerous articles and radio features on electronic music, notably for WDR Studio elektronische Musik Cologne. Reinhold lectures and teaches at the University Paris 8, Berlin UdK, London Goldsmiths University, Musikhochschule Basel, Music University Thessaloniki, a.o. He is currently completing a PhD on Iannis Xenakis's electroacoustic music at Goldsmiths, University of London.

**Alfia Nakipbekova** is an internationally acclaimed soloist and pedagogue. She studied cello with Mstislav Rostropovich, Daniil Shafran and Jacqueline du Pré. She is a recipient of the Special Prize for Outstanding Mastery of the Cello at the Casals Competition in Budapest. Alfia studied Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at Birkbeck, University of London, where she received the Marjorie Gould Prize and the Dean's Award. Alfia teaches at Leeds Conservatoire, University of Leeds and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London. She is currently researching the development of the cello in the late twentieth century for her PhD thesis *Performing Contemporary Cello Music: Defining the Interpretative Space* at the University of Leeds, and has given presentations and lecture-recitals performing *Nomos alpha* by Iannis Xenakis at various conferences, including Radboud University Nijmegen (Deleuze & Aesthetics); Universities of Birmingham, Bangor, York, Leeds, Hong Kong and Rome (Deleuze Studies Conference); University Paris 8, Goldsmiths, University of London, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and Norwegian Academy of Music, Oslo (Performance Studies Network Conference 2018). In September 2017 Alfia organised Symposium 'Exploring Xenakis: Performance, Practice, Philosophy', supported by the RMA and School of Music, University of Leeds.

**Prof. Makis Solomos** was born in Athens in 1962 and studied composition and musicology in Paris. From 1998 to 2010, he was an associate professor at University Montpellier 3. Since 2010, he is Professor at University Paris 8. He is the director of the research team MUSIDANSE. As a musicologist, he has published numerous books, articles, and papers. He also organised many symposiums and edited their proceedings. His research belongs to two main fields:

1. Research on Xenakis. One of the leading figures in Xenakis studies, he has opened new paths in this field. In his first

works, “bracketing” (in the phenomenological sense of the word) Xenakis’s music, he showed that it could be analysed as composed sound. Then he investigated the world of the young Xenakis (before *Metastaseis*). After the opening of Xenakis’s archives following the composer’s death in 2001, he began to work on the critical edition of his writings. He started conducting genetic studies with instrumental as well as electroacoustic music. His last project is about performing Xenakis’s music.

2. Research on today’s music and art. He explored various subjects: the question of space, the relationship between technics and technology, the notion of globalization, spectral music, the granular paradigm... In his book *De la musique au son. L’émergence du son dans la musique des XXe-XXIe siècles* (English translation forthcoming), he examines how sound has become a major issue for music. His recent researches are about the idea of ecology of sound in the broad sense. He is working on the project ‘Arts, ecologies, translations’, preparing a book on the subject.

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