

# **“Hiketides” by Iannis Xenakis: On the path of reviving ancient Greek musical theater**

Elena Ferapontova

Musicology faculty, Tchaikovsky Moscow State Conservatory, Russia  
eferapontova@mail.ru

The first composition by Xenakis intended for dramatic stage was “Hiketides” (1964), the title of which indicates its connection to Aeschylus’ tragedy. In this work the composer hypothetically outlined the most important features of his subsequent theatrical compositions. The original score of “Hiketides” for chorus and instrumental ensemble has not been published<sup>1</sup>. More well-known is the instrumental suite, completed later, where the part of the chorus is given to trumpets and trombones. Using the preserved archival materials – the fragments of the original score and the formal plan of “Hiketides,” made by Xenakis during the process of composing – the writer of this article suggests reconstructing this composition in part, to understand its musical style and dramaturgical conception. This will make it possible to reveal principally important artistic traits, which Xenakis later summarized in his philosophical, aesthetical conception of revival of the Antique Tragedy on the musical scene of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, expounded in his article “Notice sur l’Orestie” (1966). Following this conception, the composer created the musical tragedies “Oresteïa” (1965-1966), “Medea Seneca” (1967) and “Bakkhai” (1993).

Xenakis made his first attempt at creating a ritual fresco with the participation of chorus and orchestra, eleven years prior to composing “Hiketides” – namely, in the vocal-instrumental part of the “Anastenaria” trilogy, titled “La procession vers les eaux claires” (1953). The literary text on which “La procession” is based is a description of the ritual of “Anastenaria”, which the composer adopted from an encyclopedia article “Popular Thracian Rituals”. The Xenakis Archive is in possession of a unique document – an extensive commentary to the score of the triptych’s first movement, where the composer describes in detail the content of the ritual of Dionysus and its manifestation in music. “La procession” became a germ which budded in “Hiketides”, written more than ten years later. During all that time Xenakis had never abandoned the idea of creating a large-scale composition in the vein of an oratorio which would manifest the archaic images of antiquity. By the time the composer wrote “Oresteïa” (1966), his conception of revival of the Antique tragedy had completely matured.

Let us now turn to the score of “Hiketides”. In Aeschylus’ tragedy a special role was given to the chorus, which is interpreted as one of the participants of the drama. This precise quality of it was utilized by Xenakis in his composition. In “Hiketides” the chorus dances and plays small percussion instruments – a device which the composer turned to in many of his vocal compositions.

From the preserved fragments of the manuscript of the original score of “Hiketides” it is possible to get a certain idea of the character of the vocal lines. The chorus is divided into two groups with two parts for each group. The melodic writing does not extend the limits of a rather limited range. Xenakis aspired, as much as it was possible, to connect the vocal melodic writing with the rhythmic proportions and the intonation design of Antique poetry. In the choral part a considerable role is given to declamation on one pitch. Examples of free chant of the text could also be found. In the melodic writing in the vocal lines the delineation of tetrachords is very discernible. All these characteristics could very well refer to the scores of “Oresteïa”, “Medea” and “Bakkhai”.

Whereas the choral part in “Hiketides” is endowed with an archaic character, the instrumental section reminds of a number of Xenakis’ orchestral scores from that period. This kind of

division will also become a frequently demonstrated feature for all of Xenakis' subsequent compositions in this genre.

"Hiketides" the composer approached the question of choosing the right instrumental timbres in a much more individual way than in "La procession". The winds are represented by two trumpets and three trombones, the string section is incorporated to the fullest extent, while the percussion section includes timpani.

Following the plot, Xenakis built the form of "Hiketides" as two large-scale sections, framed by an instrumental introduction and a choral epilogue. As in the subsequent "musical tragedies", Xenakis created a distinctive libretto based on the original text, having himself selected separate lines from it. The poignant dramaturgical turnaround connecting the two sections of the tragedy coincides with the most intense moment in the plot – the captivity of Danaus's daughters and their sudden and fortunate liberation. In the musical dramaturgy of "Hiketides" Xenakis marked the rondo-like elements by means of incorporating orchestral ritornellos, which helped cement together the entire form of the composition.

The formal scheme of "Hiketides"

Intro- ducti- on	1 <sup>st</sup> Section						2 <sup>nd</sup> Section					Epi- logue
	A chor.	B orch.	A1 chor.	C orch.	A2 chor.	Cli- max orch.	D chor.	E orch.	D chor.	E orch.	Cli- max orch.	
1-36	37- 51	52- 59	60- 74	75- 79	80- 109	110- 126	127- 143	144- 150	151- 158	159- 164	165- 301	302- 361

The architectonics of "Hiketides" was to become a model in numerous ways for "Medea" and "Bakkhai", the musical form of which was built on the succession of vocal episodes and instrumental refrains, which endowed the whole form of the composition with modified features of the rondo form.

In evaluating the music of "Hiketides" retrospectively, it is important to make a note of the technical means, discovered by Xenakis, which present in this work; these will undoubtedly achieve the prominence enjoyed by the distinctive assortment of musical means of the musical stage genres of his creative output. They include: the preservation of the genuine Antique text, archaic singing by the chorus without vibrato in the conditions of chant-like melodies with narrow ranges, frequently imitating the system of Greek tetrachords, chanting of words, the inclusion of the chorus into the overall stage activity (dance and playing on percussion instruments), as well as attributes of the rondo form in the construction of the overall formal structure. All of these characteristic features would subsequently be incorporated actively in the composer's later compositions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The fragments of the score of the original version of "Hiketides" are preserved in the Xenakis Archive at the Music Department of the Bibliotheque Nationale de France (BNF) in Paris.

**Ferapontova Elena** was born in 1978. She graduated from the Tchaikovsky Moscow State Conservatory as a musicologist. She obtained her Ph.D. degree in 2008. The theme of her Ph.D. thesis -- "Iannis Xenakis's Vocal Music as a Phenomenon of his Creativity". Since 2003 she has been working as an assistant of Prof. V.N. Kholopova at the Moscow State Conservatory. At Conservatory she was also promoted to the Head of the Concert Administration in 2010. Elena is an author of a number of articles

and has presented her work at conferences devoted to the creativity of the composers of the XX-th century.