

The harpsichord works of Iannis Xenakis: Ultimate challenge in a neglected repertoire

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Proceedings of the *Xenakis International Symposium*
Southbank Centre, London, 1-3 April 2011 - www.gold.ac.uk/ccmc/xenakis-international-symposium

Within the 20th century history of harpsichord music the five works of Iannis Xenakis take a distinguished place all though they are rarely heard in concert halls. Like some of his piano pieces the extreme technical demands are primly the reason for being avoided by most harpsichordists especially those not very familiar with the performance of contemporary harpsichord music. All though the rhythmical physique of the instrument suits perfectly to Xenakis dramatic way the complexity of the works makes a precise performance impossible at least of some of them. That of course demands for another solution which is at the discretion of the performer. The other problem one has to deal with is the choice of the appropriate instrument. Xenakis wrote his pieces for a modern-style harpsichord with more registers than historical instruments. This allows more possibilities in terms of changing colors. But it is sometimes difficult to find the appropriate instruments in good conditions as they have been neglected after the renaissance of historical performance. On the other hand performing Xenakis on a good historical harpsichord copy allows a maximum of sound brilliance and beauty as well as the ability for cantabile playing in a way not that much achievable on modern instruments. However Xenakis decision for the later has to do with the dedicatee Elisabeth Chojnachka who always played on modern harpsichords.

"A l'île de Gorée" for amplified harpsichord and chamber orchestra, "Komboi" and "Oophaa" for (again amplified) harpsichord and percussion and the two solo works "Khoai" and "Naama" are the weighty output Xenakis' for this instrument. All works were written in the seventies and eighties and are related to harpsichordist Elisabeth Chojnachka, champion of the contemporary harpsichord music.

But why did Xenakis pay that much attention to this rather neglected instrument with its limited color possibilities?

Of course the harpsichord is mainly related with ancient (baroque) music despite of the fact that there were numerous compositions in recent times, one of them becoming soon a classic: György Ligeti's "Continuum" written in 1968. Before that the concertos by DeFalla, Poulenc and more recently Elliott Carter's complex Double Concerto for harpsichord, piano and two chamber orchestras from 1966 are some of the pieces written in the 20th century which established themselves in the repertoire. Despite of that the possibilities of the instrument remained unexploited. On the other hand the clarity of the harpsichord sound matches perfectly to the purity of architectural construction and organization so important to Xenakis.

Also the relation of the harpsichord to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, a great architect of music himself might not have been unimportant to his Greek colleague. And finally the already mentioned Elisabeth Chojnachka, undoubtedly the most illustrious personality of the contemporary harpsichord in the seventies gave Xenakis the opportunity to collaborate closely with a master of this instrument.

Xenakis' first harpsichord piece, Khoai (1976) breaks with every tradition using performance techniques never to be found on this instrument. With duration of minimum 15 min. it is much longer than most other harpsichord pieces at that time. The title means "offers of water and wine thrown to the earth- vows to the gods" (I.X.). A tonal-like centre established right at the beginning over the bass ton f simulates a feeling of security returning to that note again and again. In the linear movement wide intervals dominate. Repetitions are short. Slowly the formation becomes more and more filled up with new melodic and rhythmic elements leading to a technical complexity never seen in harpsichord music. The continuous and very quick change of registers is possible only with modern harpsichords where registration can be made

using pedals. If the piece is performed on a historical copy the player will be forced to ignore a great deal of these indications. Surely they belong to the pieces structure but even when choosing another solution the work does not lose anything of its shape. The piece culminates in furious chords repetitions which seem to blow up the instrument. Khoai requires huge stamina from the performer and the instrument itself.

Five years later Xenakis wrote his piece Komboi for Elisabeth Chojnachka and percussionist Sylvio Gualda. These two formed a duo at that time commissioning numerous compositions. According to the composer refers Komboi, the Greek word for knots, to knots of rhythm, sound colors, constructions and the personalities of the performers. What seems to be an unusual combination of instruments turns out to work very well thanks to the harpsichords rhythmical nature which Xenakis uses in his incomparable way. The piece starts powerful emphasizing the rhythmical element in both instruments. Shortly after the percussion rests giving to the harpsichord the opportunity for an improvisation in the style of the French baroque area prelude non mesuré. Xenakis homage to this very important element of ancient music establishes an instrumental definition looking back to the golden age of the harpsichord. I have to admit that I don't know if Xenakis did that intentional or if compositional techniques like non-octaviating scales (sieves) led to it. Fact is that esthetical beauty of sound is the result. Of course this raises the possibilities for contrasts especially to the clearly defined rhythmic sections. Within short time a huge range is given which the composer uses for every possible kind of comparison. The co-existence of the performers in a sense of chamber music making and at the same time solo sections sometimes brief sometimes long in a jazz-kind improvising session completes the feeling of joy borne out of peaceful symbiosis.

In his second solo harpsichord piece Naama (the Dorian version of the ancient Greek word Nama which means flowing water) Xenakis uses the instrument "like a percussion, harmonically and melodically simultaneously. Among others periodical constructions are used thanks to a group of transformations as well as to stochastic divisions. Flow from predictable symmetries against asymmetries sometimes in many levels at the same time" (Iannis Xenakis).

In Naama the melodic element misses almost completely giving opportunity for the rhythm to be the primary element. Of course there is a basic scale which holds everything together and the chord repetitions implicate almost tonal-like centers. But it is the clarity of the rhythm that guarantees the flintiness of the flow. Xenakis asks for an amplified instrument all though there are no problems of balance with other players. But the amplification slightly changes the harpsichords sound impression by changing the color and increasing the volume. The amplification remains the same the whole piece without influencing selected points in it.

The instrumental problems in Naama are not that serious as in Khoai and Komboi. Again a 16' is indicated and the use of pedal is the only possibility to follow precise Xenakis color indications. Maybe there is a good possibility to show a brief example of this problem which one can find very often in contemporary harpsichord music.

In bars 3 to 5 the gradual removing and later adding of registers gives the impression of first a decrescendo and then a crescendo. Obviously this is not possible on a copy of a historical instrument without making rests which of course would interrupt the flow. On the other hand the music demands to become softer and louder which is part of the composers' concept. So, how can we solve the problem? There is only the possibility to gradually change manuals that means to start with both hands on the lower, the louder manual than go up with the left hand after that with the right hand and in order to play a crescendo the other way around. This rather dry and uninspiring problem becomes even more important when Xenakis divides the different voice parameters which should be played simultaneously in separated registers in order to make them be heard clearly. In this case one cannot avoid blurring the sound impression. I'm mentioning this just to show a brief sample of instrumental problems which are basic in terms of choosing a harpsichord in contemporary music.

Two years later Xenakis writes his concerto for harpsichord and chamber orchestra "A l'île de Gorée". This island outside Dakar/Senegal was a center of slavery trade until 1848 being an UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1978. Xenakis pays tribute "to colored people who after being slaved accomplished to gain high positions in the countries they were deported to as well as to the heroes and victims of apartheid in South- Africa". This is not the first work of Xenakis

referring to humanity and matters of justice very important to the composer. *Pour la Paix* (1981) and *Pour les baleines* (1982) the latter paying tributes to the whales are some of his works to be named here. There are no indications in the score about the content so I can only assume that again the power of expression marks the tenor of the work. Although clearly separated as a soloist the harpsichord part avoids being virtuosic. It is obvious that the soloist pushes to be liberated from the orchestra and when playing unisono is rather leading than being led by her. At the end he stays alone in a brief swan song calming down to a moving gesture. Significant is also the missing of percussion in the orchestra as well as the indication "No vibrato" which demands the maximum of sound purity from the strings. The piece looks back to *Khoai* and *Komboi* in terms of harpsichord handling paying more attention to the use of sonorities in the instrument. Although the steady rhythmical element is certainly not missing it doesn't dominate exclusively the piece like in "Naama".

Xenakis last piece for harpsichord, "Oophaa" with percussion is probably the most neglected of the five pieces. The title is according to the composer a simple phonetic combination, maybe the Greek exclamation used while dancing and celebrating. To be honest Xenakis unique imagination and inspiration is slightly missing from this piece which is powerful due to the steady rhythm in both instruments but does not possess the dramatic construction of *Komboi*. The harpsichord part is kept in chords while the percussion uses rather soft instruments (flower pots, bongos, tom-toms and grand cassa). The instruments play more "together" than against each other in a harmonic symbiosis. Compared to the closely written "Okho" for three percussionists (three dzebe) *Oophaa* remains rather predictable which might be the reason for this piece is not performed very often although the technical demands are much easier than in the other pieces. Anyway for being the last of Xenakis harpsichord works it surely deserves more attention and it also might be a good piece for younger performers not very well acquainted with contemporary music.

To conclude we should ask ourselves about the aftereffect of Xenakis harpsichord music. The answer is easy to find: they remain unique within a repertoire steadily growing and have no follower. Lead to the edge they are hard to be topped and it is deplorable that there are actually a large number of harpsichordists who never heard of these pieces. However we owe Xenakis gratitude for extending the instruments repertoire and can only hope that they will become classics in the awareness of every performer.

Despite on every analysis which is kept brief due to the shortness of the time Xenakis' power is not to be conceived rational. The physical form serves to disclose the uniqueness of its creator establishing Xenakis as one of the leading composers for harpsichord of our time.

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