

The Universality of Xenakis' *Oresteia*

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ABSTRACT

This paper will look at Xenakis' major music drama *Oresteia* (1965-6) based on the same tragedy by Aeschylus, for mixed choir and ensemble, which embodies the composer's genuine passion for the Classical world and also his long-life conviction that the study and revival of the Greek scales can pave the way for the music of the future. *Oresteia* is the only piece of Xenakis which he approached twice in the span of three decades. In 1987, he added *Kassandra* for baritone and percussion and in 1992, the initial trilogy was completed with the insertion of *La Déesse Athéna* for baritone and eleven musicians. In relation to the last version of *Oresteia*, I shall discuss a) why Xenakis opted for the roles of Cassandra and the goddess Athena as additions to the first composition, b) whether these two insertions should be seen as *Oresteia's* artistic weakness, examining in particular how they fit into the musical context of the first trilogy in relation to its overall structure, musical style, and the use of the ancient text.

1. INTRODUCTION

It was Xenakis' instrumental music that established him unmistakably as one of the most prominent post-war composers. With his watershed works *Metastasis*, *Pithoprakta* and *Achorripsis*, he voyaged further than anyone else, combining science with music. Xenakis' serious engagement with the voice and classical dramas in particular started in the sixties, after experimenting for more than a decade with rigid mathematical theories. This proves that the initial domination of science over Xenakis' works was not uncontested or absolute, but certainly a priority at a given time. One plausible question to ask is how expected or natural this additional consideration was, from mathematics to the Greek drama. The emergence of the classical legacy in Xenakis' music is not contradictory with his previous activity as a composer. The fifties was a critical decade for him and greatly eventful in terms of research and experimentation. He needed to focus and advocate his thesis that new music should be founded on the premises of mathematics. Thus, as long as Xenakis established his theories and reputation, he could base his repertoire on the dialectic between logic (science) and classical drama. This was a self-evident correlation for him, which extended both his musical style and his theoretical framework. It seems that the vocal

works are more personal than the instrumental in the sense that they communicate Xenakis' thoughts on ancient drama and philosophy, a private concern that dates back to his youth. Works based on classical plays and Greek subject matters were not rare in the preceding century, but none of Xenakis' contemporaries could rival him for his extended and lasting research on the ancient Greek language and drama.

2. THE TRILOGY *ORESTEIA*

2.1 Conception and History

His most celebrated classical work, the trilogy *Oresteia* (1965-6), based on the same tragedy by Aeschylus, is one of the composer's masterpieces in his entire oeuvre. *Oresteia* was first performed on June 14th 1966 at the small town of Ypsilanti in Michigan under the direction of Alexis Solomos. Before composing this work, he had previously been working on two other dramas, including *Polla ta Dhina* (1962) and *Hiketides* (1964) by Sophocles and Aeschylus respectively. Therefore, Xenakis had already some previous experience in setting music on ancient plays, which this time helped him to write a more deeply ritual music not paralleled in his earlier works. *Oresteia* was the second production of Aeschylus's play in the history of American theatre and the first to be performed in the English language.¹ The first commercial performance of the complete *Oresteia* (excluding University productions) was given in 1961 by the Greek 'Piraikon' [7:68-69]. Xenakis wrote a concert version of *Oresteia* (suite) after the American production. This version is much shorter than the first one,² but the most important difference is that Xenakis uses the original, Greek text, and not the English translation of the Ypsilanti production. In one of his letters he writes: 'The music is born out of the holy bones of Greeks.'³ I needed to read again Aristoxenus and Ptolemy⁴ and also a book on Byzantine music. Of course my music not ancient!⁵

At the time Xenakis was finishing *Oresteia*, he published the essay 'Antiquity and Contemporary Music.' (1966), where he discusses succinctly his thoughts regarding the reconstruction of ancient sounds and also *Oresteia's* music. In this essay the author starts off with a definition of Greek theatre as 'total experience' in the sense of a total experience (like the Wagnerian synaesthesia of *Gesamtkunstwerk*), which is not confined to the senses of ear or vision, but also takes place in the sphere of thought [12:105]. Here Xenakis follows the Hegelian approach 'there is nothing in the sense experience that has not been in the intellect' that contradicts Aristotle's words, 'there is nothing in the intellect that has not been sense experience' [1:72]. The composer states that 'The ancient drama cannot possibly be expressed with tonal or atonal music like serialism. This kind of music is typical of another epoch.' The use of tetrachords and the extensive use of microtonality in *Oresteia*, for instance, are attempts to assimilate a music language common in ancient and non-

¹ From the same source (p.96) we learn that the citizens of Ypsilanti, who began the Greek festival, wanted to make it an annual event, but at the end this ambition remained just a dream. Solomo's *Oresteia* took place in the Briggs Baseball stadium at Eastern Michigan University.

² The music for the play lasts about 100 minutes while the concert version is only 40 minutes.

³ The phrase 'born out of the holy bones of Greeks' is taken from the Greek National Anthem.

⁴ Claudius Ptolemy or Ptolemeus was an astronomer, music theorist, mathematician and geographer, born in Alexandria approximately in 87-150 AD. His surname indicates that he was of Greek descent, but his first name suggests an Italian connection.

⁵ BNF, Musique: archives Xenakis.

Western cultures. Considerations such as ‘systems’ ‘order’ ‘in-time’ and ‘out-time’ structures were born out of the necessity to think afresh about what kind of music is suitable for the ancient drama.⁶ It is interesting that here Xenakis also draws attention to the Japanese *Noh* theatre, which has been a continuous tradition approximately since the 13th century and in contrast to the Greek theatre, which ceased to exist when Greece was under Turkish occupation.⁷

2.2 The music

Oresteia, written for a mixed and children’s choir and a chamber ensemble, reflects the composer’s most successful attempt to write music for a Greek tragedy. However, we may ask how can the theoretical research and personal excitement be translated into accomplished sounds? Would it be possible and realistic for a composer to trace back and reconstruct the music from ancient civilisations when it is so poorly documented?⁸ Who could guarantee the validity of the final result both aesthetic and musical, and to what extent is this necessary? For Xenakis, the natural melody of the original text was the only source of guidance and inspiration. He states: ‘The poetics of the speech is the most important tradition we have inherited. None of the translations render or will ever render its strength’ [12:8]. Almost twenty years later Xenakis added two more parts: *Kassandra* (1987) and *La Déesse Athéna* (1992). *Kassandra* is based on the rhythm of the ancient text, on prosody, while in *La Déesse Athéna*, Xenakis does not seem to rely so much on the natural stress of the words, but he makes the words follow the rhythm of the music, creating an unusual and idiosyncratic melodic effect. His self-exploration concerning the Greek prosody and the potential reconstruction of the Mycenaean language⁹ in *Aïs*, *Kassandra*, and *La Déesse Athéna* shows that Xenakis was equally interested and prepared to pursue research in this area as well, broadening the scope of his research interests. Although we cannot be certain regarding the sound of the Mycenaean Greek, scholars assume that it represented a harsher version in comparison with the later dialects. Despite the fact that Xenakis might have come up with a version that could be considerably different from the original one, he was probably not much concerned whether the final result was scientifically accurate. It is thus evident that Xenakis was more interested in exploring and experimenting with a possible reconstruction of this archaic version of proto-Greek. Once again he displayed a consistent commitment to the exploration of sound *per se*. From this point of view, the performance of the text in *Kassandra* and *La Déesse Athéna* sound different from the rest of *Oresteia*.

The initial concert version of *Oresteia* consisted of three parts as in the Greek play: *Agamemnon*, *Choepores* (The Libation Bearers), and *Eumenides* (The Furies). In *Oresteia*

⁶ Xenakis mentions in the essay that these considerations were also applied to the music of *Hiketides* written two years earlier.

⁷ In the same essay the composer specifies seven functions used in his music: a) the song or the intonation of the human voice (line 152 in *Choepores*), b) the support of speech (line 1468 in *Agamemnon*), c) sonic comment (the murder of Agamemnon), d) objects of worship (exorcism of Elektra’s and Orestes’s slaves in *Choepores*), e) support of dancing (lines 140 onwards in *Eumenides*), f) symbolism of events (wedding fanfare of Agamemnon), and g) noises pertaining to music (i.e. Clytemnestra’s spectrum).

⁸ A classic book regarding the music of Ancient Greece is M. L. West, *Ancient Greek music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). See also Giovanni Comotti, *Music in Greek and Roman Culture*, trans. Rosaria V. Munson (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989).

⁹ Interview with Spyros Sakkas, 2 September 2004.

with the exception of the additional parts of *Kassandra* and *La Déesse Athéna*, which both include a baritone, the choral element predominates in all three sections (Agamemnon, Choefores, Eumenides). Thus initially Xenakis places emphasis on the significance of the chorus as achieved in most tragedies, including *Oresteia*, where the most important contribution of the chorus is that of music. The composer asks for an asynchronus delivery of the text (in the main he was interested in offering an incomprehensible text to his audience), a children's chorus, which very cleverly represents the transformation of Erynies to Eumenides, and conventional choral odes coupled with rapid interactions in the fashion of a *stichomythia*,¹⁰ increasing the dramatic sense through dialogue among the chorus members. Passages of austere primitivism, pagan sounds, linear, monodic chromaticism are some of the original text and he also indicates specific verses when there is only instrumental music. Something else which is important is that he does not follow the sequence based on the lines of the text. For instance from line 688 ('Helen? For in matter fitting to her name') then Xenakis jumps to 681 ('Who can have named her'). But these lines could be used in either order so this does not affect the narration. Similarly in lines 489 (Oh Earth, send up my father to survey the battle'), 486 ('Oh sorrow inbred in the race') and 490 ('Oh Persephasa, grant him victory'!), he is more interested in the synchronous sound of 'Oh' as a common element rather the logical succession of the plot.

3. ORESTEIA REVISITED

3.1 *Kassandra*

Almost thirty years later the composer decided to extend *Oresteia* and thus added *Kassandra* for percussion and amplified baritone (also playing a twenty-string psaltery), which is now the second movement of the *Oresteia* trilogy.¹¹ Looking at Xenakis' works as a whole, we notice that he never returned to rewrite or expand a previous work of his. In conversing with Varga, the composer explains that he avoids any strong emotional ties with older compositions as he tries to concentrate on his current work [10: 69]. Therefore the addition of *Kassandra* and later on of *La Déesse Athéna* is the unique exception to that principle. We shall never know whether Xenakis had strong emotional ties with the original music of *Oresteia*, but it is his only piece reapproached not once but twice after more than two decades. Apparently the initial concert version was a provisional work that Xenakis planned to extend in the future. *Kassandra* can be both performed and analysed independently from the rest of the *Oresteia* and it may also invite comparison with the music of the traditional Japanese theatre. In the latter the instrumentation is usually simple and uncomplicated alongside a high, stylised singing in which the voice drops and rises – sometimes without using specifically musical notation – delivering both spoken drama and passages of song [8:70]. Likewise in *Kassandra* there is also a concern for a plain, unsophisticated instrumentation. Additionally, the use of psaltery and the bendings of the voice enhance such a reflection.

3.2 *La Déesse Athéna*

¹⁰ A line-by-line dialogue in the Greek drama.

¹¹ The piece was written for Spyros Sakkas and the percussionist Sylvio Gualda and it was first performed on August 21 at the Gibellina festival in Sicily.

La Déesse Athéna (The goddess Athena)¹² for baritone and eleven musicians was one of the last vocal pieces Xenakis composed in general and the last one for Spyros Sakkas' voice in particular. It was also the last insertion he composed to the *Oresteia* trilogy. The composer never clarified why he opted for these particular additions of Cassandra and the goddess Athena, instead of writing music for a more important role, such as that of Orestes or Clytemnestra. The 'Cassandra scene' is also given particular prominence in the play of Aeschylus, where its lengthy monologue indicates a turning point in the plot.¹³ As Brooks points out: 'The long Cassandra scene (1035-1330), of almost three hundred lines, comes as contrast and climax to the preceding episodes and stasima. We no longer remain in the dim, ambiguous, grippingly moralistic thought-world of the chorus.' [2:40]. Being a prophetess, Cassandra has already the dramatic advantage of a complex character and although she does not have a leading role in the play, her tragic presence must have inspired Xenakis to broaden his dramaturgy. He then added the speech of the goddess just before the transformation of Erinyes to Eumenides. This moment of change is the most important one in the last part of the Aeschylus's trilogy, and Athena's monologue plays a major role in this transformation, leading to a turning point. Although Athena's role lacks Cassandra's ritualism, her presence in the fourth episode in *Eumenides* is not musically less important than that of the prophetess's scene. Conacher writes that 'Athena's return would itself have a significant spectacular and aural effect, as she leads in her chosen band of Aeropagites calling on the Etruscan trumpet to sound and the herald to marshal the people to their places'.¹⁴ Thus from a philological point of view both roles evoke a musical effect either with their peculiar speech (Cassandra) or with their presence (Athena).¹⁵ Both Cassandra and Athena represent something beyond the human element; this fiction world must have certainly provided Xenakis with a more interesting basis to think and write about vocality. This may be the reason why he resorted to Sakkas's voice for the roles in question instead of choosing a female one. The performer's ability to stretch his voice to a really high-pitched falsetto suggests a dramatic persona midway between a human being and something else, in our case a prophetess or a goddess.¹⁶

3.3 Reception

The song of Cassandra comes at the heart of the first movement of *Agamemnon*, to be followed by the fully choral movement of *Choephores* and the last movement of *Eumenides*, which is also divided by the solo monologue of Athena (choir-solo-choir, choir,

¹² Athena was the goddess of wisdom, justice, and war. She was one of the most famous gods in the Greek mythology.

¹³ Cassandra was a prophetess, sister of Pythia the most famous prophetess in Ancient Greece. Because of her astonishing beauty, she was given the charisma of prophecy by Apollo, the god of music and culture. He later, though, decided to put a curse on her sayings: nobody would ever believe Cassandra's prognostications, a fitting punishment for her refusal to submit to his sexual requests. In the scene in question, the young prophetess is already in Greece, captured by the king Agamemnon who took her with him as a mistress. She is trying in vain to explain to the men of Argos (the chorus) that she and Agamemnon will soon be murdered by his wife Clytemnestra, who will seek to take revenge on her husband's long-term absence and infidelity. Because of Cassandra's curse her prophecy meets only the disbelief of the men of Argos and the completion of the tragedy is only a matter of time.

¹⁴ D.J.Conacher, *Aeschylus' Oresteia*, 159.

¹⁵ According to Greek mythology, Athena was born out of Zeus' head and for this reason she may have some androgynous characteristics.

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that Verdi used to show a certain reserve towards Aeschylus's characters because of their unclear nature between men or gods. [9:42].

choir-solo-choir). With this latest addition, Xenakis creates a balanced scheme between choir and solo singing in *Oresteia*.

<u>Aeschylus's Oresteia</u>	<u>Xenakis' Oresteia</u>
a) Agamemnon	a) Agamemnon Kassandra (scene from Agamemnon) Agamemnon (continued)
b) Choefores	b) Choefores
c) Eumenides	c) Eumenides Goddess Athena (scene from Eumenides) Eumenides (continued)

However, for many critics this musical ‘pastiche’ was *Oresteia*'s weakness. The world premiere of *La Déesse Athéna* together with the national premiere of the *Oresteia* trilogy in Athens received mixed reviews. The Greek press was particularly critical, among other disapproving comments, regarding the music of *Oresteia* as a whole.¹⁷ The use of percussion in both *Kassandra* and the goddess Athena was conceived as an imitation of African drumming. Sakkas was viewed as the only hero in that performance for his ability to shriek for twenty minutes! Although there is a balance between the solo and the choir passages, the listener might have the feeling that the principal sounds converge from two incompatible sources: the choir's music and the baritone's two separate additions. This makes the music work on different levels that may restrain its full acceptance. In addition to this context, we should note that the score of *La Déesse Athéna* is notably different from the rest of the composition, including the earlier addition *Kassandra*, as regards its microtonal singing and glissando sound. This is an important digression from the overall style of *Oresteia* despite the fact that Xenakis preserves both a similar instrumentation and the baritone's fluency to sing almost simultaneously in two registers. However, in *La Déesse Athéna* even though Xenakis retains some of the basic features, he substitutes the microtonal notation and singing with conventional writing and the glissando principle with focal pitches, which lack the linear impulse we get both before and after the addition of the goddess Athena. From this point of view, this composition written almost thirty years after the first version of *Oresteia* and five years after the first insertion of *Kassandra*, may seem to resist stylistic consistency in the context of *Oresteia*.

4. CONCLUSION

Could it be an additional dimension of preference or is it *Oresteia*'s artistic weakness? It would not be easy to argue confidently in favour of either view. Perhaps, *La Déesse Athéna* is not as attractive or inspired as the remaining music of *Oresteia*; however, it should be seen as part of Xenakis' musical argument. *Kassandra*, despite the strong oriental associations that may evoke, it does not fit awkwardly into *Oresteia*'s musical context. As Pierre Boulez has stated ‘the Greek theatre and the Japanese also provide examples of a “sacred” language in which archaisms gravely reduce, if they do not entirely abolish

¹⁷ All the information and the reviews presented here are from the press archive of the Megaron Concert Hall in Athens, where the world premiere of *La Déesse Athéna* took place.

intelligibility'[3:81]. In that case, it is the dramatic context that appeals more to Xenakis (voice, expression, text, music) than anything else. If the use of phonemes and mathematics form a universal language in his other works, then *Kassandra's* music in *Oresteia* could also be seen as another proposal in search of universality.

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