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Surrounded by Percussion (Noise, That Is)

By **ALLAN KOZINN**

Iannis Xenakis was a master of many things, musical and otherwise, and as a composer one of his specialties was getting musicians to make a whole lot of noise. It is deeply organized noise, naturally, and in terms of timbres, textures and dynamics you could hardly hope for more variety than he provides. And if you have quibbles about the term noise, used nonpejoratively, plan to be on hand the next time Xenakis's "Persephassa" (1969) is performed in the relatively close quarters of Alice Tully Hall.

In that work, which made up the second half of a Xenakis program by [Les Percussions de Strasbourg](#) on Saturday evening, six players were stationed around the hall, two on the stage and the other four on platforms, so that the audience was surrounded. Each musician had a hefty array of instruments: bass drums, tom-toms, blocks, gongs and whistles, among other things. And when the players whaled on their drums, fortissimo and in unison, the sound was something like that of a [steel mill](#) at full throttle.

That said, there would be little point in surrounding an audience only to pummel it, and "Persephassa" has its subtle moments too. Its name is Greek for Persephone, the queen of Hades and goddess of springtime renewal, and one of Xenakis's goals here is to evoke transformation.

In one passage each player in turn used a small, hard mallet to strike a hanging wood block in a pattern that also included periodic taps on a light, metallic object. This tactile sequence moved rapidly around the hall several times, changing slightly with every pass.

Elsewhere Xenakis's changes were more sudden. Graceful jangling gave way to thunder, and thunder gave way to silence. Spring was suggested in a brief wood block passage that seemed to mimic a woodpecker at work, and a passage for gongs, encircling the audience, created an eerily mystical effect. But mostly the piece thrived on the ensemble's tight interplay, entirely apart from extramusical associations.

The virtuosic Strasbourg musicians — whose contribution to [Lincoln Center's TullyScope](#)

festival also included a performance of Gérard Grisey’s “Noir de l’Étoile” on Friday night — devoted the first half of their Xenakis program to “Pléïades” (1979), a work composed for them. Here the players were deployed in a straight line across the stage, each moving among banks of vibraphones, marimbas, xylophones, drums, gongs and bells.

The score, in four movements, probes specific kinds of sound (mixed timbres, metals, keyboards and skins) in a blend of complexity and directness, with persistently repetitive sections offset by unpredictable bursts and sudden changes of direction.

Obviously a work of this kind will suggest different images to each listener. For me parts of “Claviers,” an exploration of pitched instruments, summoned a cartoonish vision of Milt Jackson, the vibraphonist of the Modern Jazz Quartet, magnified, mechanized and out of control. That was probably not what Xenakis had in mind, but there it was.

The TullyScope festival runs through March 18 at Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center; (212) 721-6500, lincolncenter.org.