

# Iannis Xenakis

celebration of the centenary of the composer (1922-2001)  
by the Percussions de Strasbourg



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*Pléiades* at the Festival Milano Musica



Percussions  
de Strasbourg





Xenakis and the Percussions de Strasbourg, 1984

It has been said several times that, thanks to percussion, Xenakis reintroduced the problem of rhythm that was thought to have disappeared from contemporary music.

Architect, engineer and composer, this genius of composition writes music whose complex and harmonious structure contrasts with the explosive energy that comes out of it.

The Percussions de Strasbourg are proud to have collaborated so closely with this composer who dedicated to them the works *Persephassa* (1969) and *Pléiades* (1979), which have become a must in the field of percussion.

*Idmen A and B* (1985) is also dedicated to the Percussions de Strasbourg. *Psappha* (1975) and *Rebonds A and B* (1987-88) are solos that appear in our repertoire as well as the trio *Okho* (1989).

Minh-Tâm Nguyen,  
artistic director of the Percussions de Strasbourg

2021: 20<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of the composer

2022: Centenary of the birth of the composer

## ON TOUR

*Persephassa* (1969), immersive concert for 6 percussionists

+ *Kore\** - Carmine-Emanuele Cella (2019), for 6 percussionists

*Pléiades* (1979), for 6 percussionists

+ *Whiplash\** - Stéphane Magnin (2017), for 6 percussionists

\*Commissioned by the Percussions de Strasbourg

2022: Release of the album *Persephassa + Pléiades - XENAKIS* on the label of the Percussions de Strasbourg

## REPERTOIRE

*Psappha* (1975), for 1 percussionist

*Idmen A* (1985), for 4 percussionists and choir

*Idmen B* (1985), for 6 percussionists and choir

*Rebonds A et B* (1988), for 1 percussionist

*Okho* (1989), for 3 percussionists



## The release of sound The composer Iannis Xenakis

The audience of the Donaueschingen Festival could have guessed what was in store for them when they went through the program of the concert on October 16, 1955. The text stated that the listener, whether he wanted to or not, should be drawn into the trajectory of sound, without any prior training being necessary. It was also about a sensory shock as striking as the sound of thunder or the contemplation of a bottomless abyss...

This little introduction by the then little-known composer Iannis Xenakis did not, however, succeed in dampening the stormy or even furious reactions triggered by the premiere of his orchestral piece *Metastasis*. Carried by a prodigious force, sound arcs seemingly without any shape had flooded over an audience that wondered if they would lose their hearing and sight. The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung critic compared Xenakis's first major work to «sirens screaming during an air raid». The Greek composer, born in Romania in 1922 and living in Paris, was now on everybody's lips. With his musical language made of archaic accents and resounding and implacable sound pulse, thus in perfect contradiction with the style in vogue at the time, he nevertheless remained a marginal figure in the world of contemporary music.

Until 1960, Xenakis had to earn his living as an architect and engineer assisting the apostle of concrete, Le Corbusier. Even in this role, he managed to mark his time with the Philips Pavilion, designed for the Brussels World Fair in 1958. Not content to look like a gigantic futuristic tepee, the building was equipped with more than 350 loudspeakers inside, so that music enveloped visitors from all sides. For Xenakis, the sound architect, was firmly convinced that there was no reason for the sound

to come from only one direction. According to him, the usual arrangement of a concert, where the music comes from the front, is only one possibility among others.

From his youth, Xenakis dreamed of a career as a musician. But until this self-taught musician finally joined Olivier Messiaen's composition class in Paris in 1950, his path was full of pitfalls, to say the least. In the early 1940s, Xenakis fought against the German occupier within the Greek communist resistance. During the civil war that followed, he was seriously wounded in the face by a shell fired from a British tank and later sentenced to death in absentia. Armed with a false passport in the name of Konstantin Kastrounis, he fled via Italy to Paris, where he lived and worked until his death on February 4, 2001.

Iannis Xenakis composed nearly 150 works. And although he was later one of the co-founders of IRCAM, the Parisian institute specialized in electronic music, compositions for acoustic ensembles constitute the bulk of his work. Almost all his pieces has Greek titles and thus refer to roots he was proud of all his life.

A remarkable feature common to almost all his scores, they never give a hint of the rigorously mathematical and scientific foundation that presided over the approach applied by this civil engineer when he set to work. On the contrary, his works live by their sensory immediacy, astounding and striking, despite the calculations that underlie them and for which the composer even specially developed computer programs. For any form of music petrified in a pure intellect was profoundly foreign to him. For Xenakis, the musical work had to be a living organism, with «a head and arms».

*Original text in german by Guido Fischer*

## The Sixxen

Instrument designed by Xenakis, les Percussions de Strasbourg  
and the instrument maker Robert Hébrard

In 2021-2022, on the occasion of the recording of *Pléiades* and *Persephassa* but also of the centenary of the composer's birth, the Percussions de Strasbourg built a new version of the Sixxens.

Specially designed in 1979 for the Percussions de Strasbourg to play the piece *Pléiades*, the Sixxen is a metallic instrument of 19 pitches, unevenly distributed with different pitches of the order of a quarter or a third of a tone and their multiples.

It takes its name from the number SIX (traditionally the number of musicians in the Percussions de Strasbourg) and from the name XEN, the beginning of the name Xenakis. It was thought in 6 copies for the 6 musicians of the group, but in such a way that all the Sixxens played together never form unisons. Its creator, Robert Hébrard, conceived it in close collaboration with the ensemble and the composer.

Its history is special because this third generation of Sixxens is to date the only existing set in the world. Many other ensembles have built instruments that come close to it in order to play the numerous pieces where it is required, but none of them have been assembled in such a way as to find exactly the sound, so specific, that makes all the uniqueness of the original object.

Over the past 40 years, many ensembles have had instruments made that come close to the Sixxens, but their quality has never equalled that of Robert Hébrard's Sixxens, in terms of sound, resonance, precision and projection.





© Margherita Bus

Persephassa at the Festival Milano Musica

## PERSEPHASSA + KORE - 80' Spatialized concert for 6 percussionists

Being in the heart of the sound is a dream for man, redefining its space, its distribution is a challenge for composers. In this program, the audience is the central player : the Percussions de Strasbourg musicians are on six stages all around the audience. Closing one's eyes and getting caught up in the sound, realizing that the entire body becomes a sound sensor. Everything turns into sensations, discoveries, suspensions. An amazing sound world, much wider than what our eyes claim to see...

TEASER: <https://youtu.be/ZwGgzzyr8BU>

## **PERSEPHASSA (1969) - 35'** **Iannis Xenakis**

**« Xenakis, the architect of sound, was firmly convinced that there was no justification for sound to come from only one direction. According to him, the usual arrangement of a concert, where the music comes from the front, is only one possibility among others. »**  
**Guido Fischer**

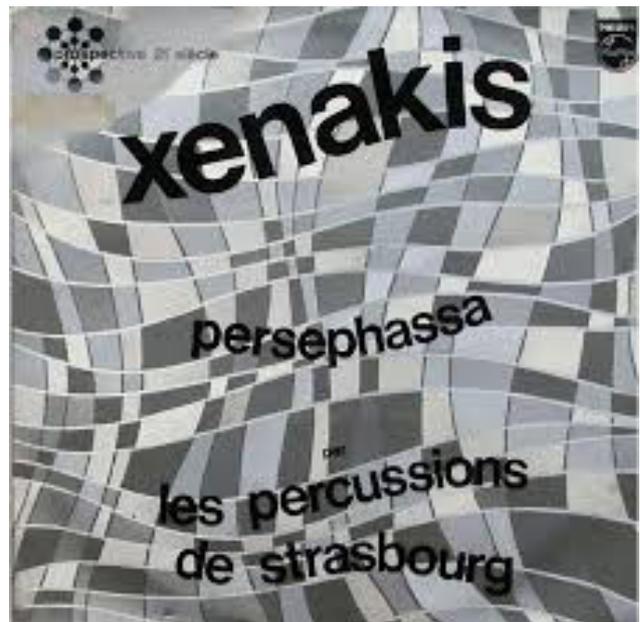
*Persephassa* has established itself as a definitive classic in the percussion repertoire. It was premiered in 1969 in Iran by its dedicatees, the Percussions de Strasbourg.

The title *Persephassa* refers to the goddess Persephone, or Kore, personification of the telluric forces and transmutations of life. These are linked to the cosmic cycles of living species and to man in particular, the basis being period, iteration, the very essence of number theory and mathematics. This is the underlying reason for the role of percussion, which also symbolized telluric and celestial activities.

At the time of its creation, Xenakis proposed new instruments, the wooden or metal simantras, already used in *Orestia* and whose original idea can be found in the simandres of the Greek convents, «real nests of an ancestral rhythm not yet destroyed by Radio, Television or invasions».

The 6 percussionists are placed in a ring around the audience, which is thus enclosed in these currents carried by the music. The trajectories cross or evolve according to a sound choreography staged by the composer. Before a game of increasing and decreasing waterfalls, rhythms twirling in space and chaotic clouds of sound unfolds, the sextet's timpani rolls call *Persephassa* in an incantation. Through a progressive acceleration, the music will transport the audience in a gigantic whirlwind. If this «tourniquet» evokes the dance of whirling dervishes, Xenakis does not aim at trance: sudden cuts, brief but unpredictably distributed, bring the listener out of his torpor at the end.

**Commission:** French Ministry of Culture (Music Department), Festival of Persepolis  
**World Premiere:** 9.09.1969, Festival of Persepolis (Iran)  
par les Percussions de Strasbourg



## **KORE (2019) - 25'** **Carmine-Emanuele Cella**

### **A piece in resonance with Persephassa**

*Kore* is a piece for 6 percussionists using smart-instruments scattered around the audience.

It takes its inspiration from the Xenakis' masterpiece *Persephassa* and aims to extend the possibilities found by Carmine-Emanuele Cella when he created *Inside Out*, performed by Les Percussions de Strasbourg at IRCAM in 2017.

In *Persephassa*, the musicians use a large range of instruments and sound effects during the piece, among which wood blocks called simantras, that were conceived on purpose for this piece.

In *Inside Out*, many changes of paradigms have been made in the continuation with Xenakis' research. With the help of new electronic devices used on large size instruments, Carmine-Emanuele Cella managed to create a new global and physical instrument around the audience, played collectively by all the musicians. These devices still had a primitive form then, but they presented an extreme potential in terms of conception

of the timbre and interaction man-instrument. The piece was a big success.

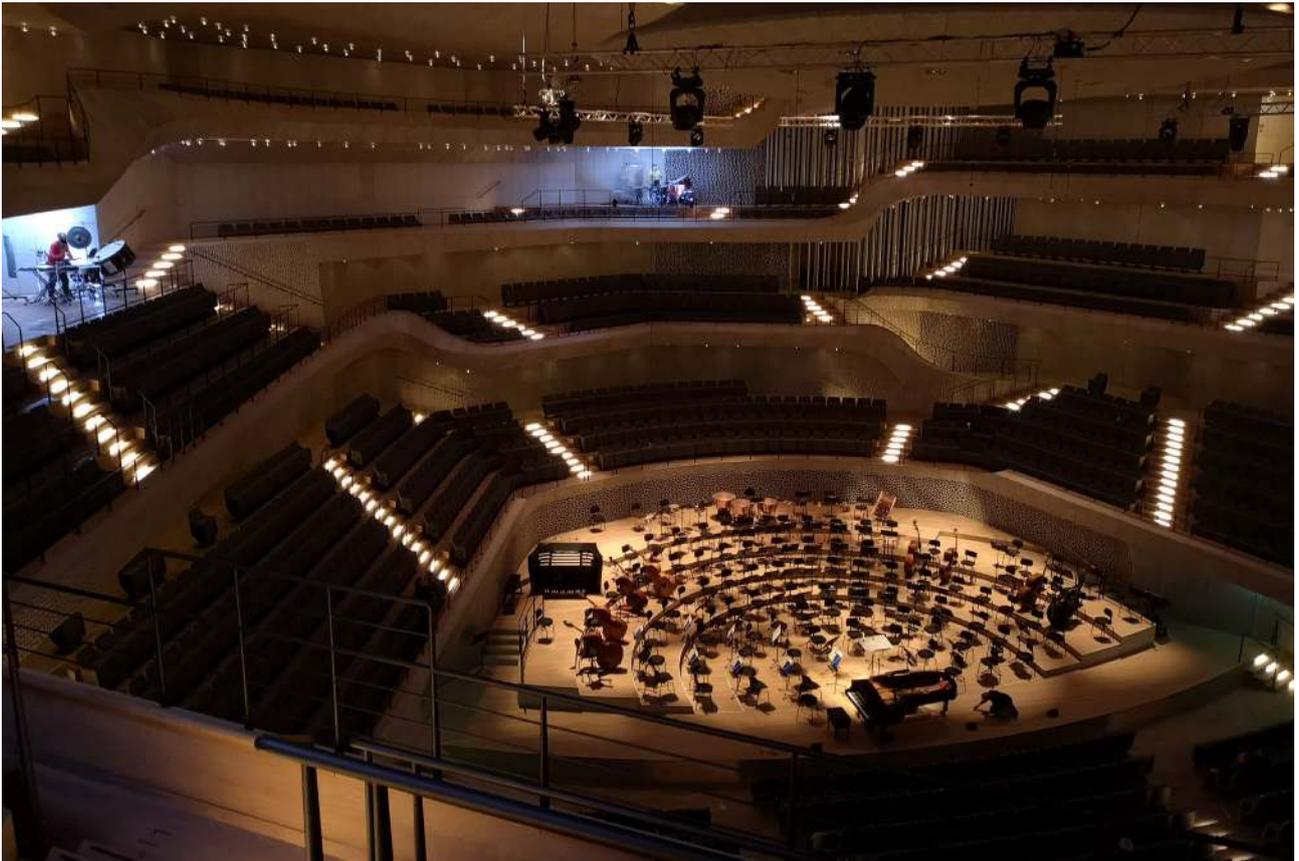
With *Kore*, Carmine-Emanuele Cella develops this process. The percussions should be big enough to make the system efficient (such as timbals, bass drum, tam-tam, etc.) and the percussionists should be displayed around the audience, in the spirit of Xenakis's *Persephassa*.

In addition, again inspired by Xenakis, *Kore* deploys 6 new instruments called Xulon based on the technology developed for *Inside out*. The main characteristics of Xulon are that they can completely transform the sound and the interaction of the musician depending on the gesture. This process creates augmented instruments that can fully integrate the listening space, merging the immersiveness of the global electronics with the location of the source and creating a new paradigm for listening to the electronic sound.

**Commission:** French Ministry of Culture

**World Premiere:** 09.10.2019, Hangar Bicocca, Festival  
Milano Musica

Persephassa at the Hamburg Elbphilharmonie



© Alexandra Aday





*Pléiades*

## PLÉIADES + WHIPLASH - 80' Program in mirror for 6 percussionists

First of all, there is one of the most important percussion ensembles in France and in the world, which is experiencing an exciting revival. Then, there are six musicians who lacerated the silence of their whips in a gesture of a great theatricality with Whiplash by Stéphane Magnin. Then there is Pleiades, one of the most beautiful pieces written by Iannis Xenakis. The richness of the timbres, the freedom and the coherence of the composition make this work a unique rhythmic adventure.

LISTEN HERE: <https://youtu.be/9X6LKxmSzWQ>

## **PLÉIADES (1979) - 45'** **Iannis Xenakis**

**Commission:** Ville de Strasbourg  
**Dedicatees:** Les Percussions de Strasbourg  
**Recreation:** 24.06.2011 with Ensemble l'Abrupt – Alban  
Richard, Festival Montpellier Danse, Opéra du Rhin

The Pleiades usually evoke the cluster of sparkling stars in the right shoulder of the Taurus constellation. In the northern hemisphere, the Pleiades are only visible in winter. A telescope allows us to observe dozens of stars, of which only six are visible to the naked eye, as well as a light milky fog in the same area. According to Greek mythology, this cluster of stars represents the seven sisters or Pleiades, servants of Artemis, Goddess of the Moon. One of the sisters, Electra, is said to have disappeared as a comet, eaten away with grief after the siege and destruction of the city of Troy built by her son Dardanus, victim of the famous Trojan Horse ploy. The whiteness and fog in which the Pleiades appear would be the result of the tears shed by the six sisters abandoned by Electra. Thus, the title *Pléiades* refers to the six members of the Percussions de Strasbourg. But for Xenakis, the reference to the multiplicity of existence seems more important.

The very essence of this piece rests on the fact that it is not limited to a simple definition. The instruments used range from keyboards (vibraphone and marimba), to various percussion instruments and the «sixxen» - a percussion instrument specially created for this composition.

The piece is divided into four parts whose titles refer to the materials used to make the instruments and the sounds they produce: «Mélanges» performed simultaneously by various percussion instruments, then «Métaux», «Claviers» and «Peaux». Listening to the sixxen in «Métaux», one immediately thinks of the gamelan of Indonesia, especially those from Bali, the instruments used in festive music in Japan, the chimes of churches in the Mediterranean basin and the cowbells of the Alps. The richness of timbre of the sixxen is in a way an expression of the different types of life led by man, of which metals are an integral part. While giving absolute freedom to the concept of a multiplicity of existence, Xenakis has been able to impose a rule of diversity and unity in the temporal structure of his research towards the creation of a single composition.

## **WHIPLASH (2017) - 35'** **Stéphane Magnin**

**Commission:** Les Percussions de Strasbourg  
**Dedicatees:** Les Percussions de Strasbourg

*Whiplash*, everything could fit in a second. A radical face to face, light/silence, sound/darkness, hide/show... A time contracted to the extreme in a suspended clap... The whip, a percussion instrument composed of two articulated and percussive wooden blades, imitates the clacking of the weapon that bears the same name. Six musicians in front of the stage (percussionists having left their usual instrumental hideout), standing, facing the audience, motionless, silent. Theater without story, dramaturgy without character, setting in body of the sound production. The sound-gesture of a whiplash - whiplash - whistle of air punctuated by a dry slap imprints its mark and becomes the basic material of the work.

By association, the score brings together instruments that respond to the acoustic characteristics of these two sound families: the «air sound» and/or spun and the «dry slap».

The musical purpose, neither illustrative nor with a message, starts from this strong sound gesture and transposes it into the abstraction of writing, rhythm, aesthetics, poetics, playing, without forcing the line.

Whiplash, as a symbol of verticality, of the violence of power, of its declensions: training, aggression, harassment, punishment, persecution, torture, punishment, execution. The emotional charge made of accumulated tensions will find its outlet through the transposition of the whiplash in the violent crackling of the sound of saturated metals spun by the enormous slap of the overpowering skins.

# PLÉIADES WITH CHOREOGRAPHY

A choreographed version of *Pléiades* was created by Alban Richard, premiered with the Percussions de Strasbourg in 2011 at the Festival Montpellier Danse.



*Pléiades* at the Festival Montpellier Danse

## REPERTOIRE

### PSAPPHA (1975) - 12' Iannis Xenakis

**Commission:** Gulbenkian Foundation

**Dedicatees:** Sylvio Gualda

**World Premiere:** 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 1976, UK, London, Round House, by Sylvio Gualda

**Instrumental set:** 1 percussionist

**Publisher:** Salabert

Piece for solo percussion, with a large instrumental cast (five groups). But it is not the sound color that Xenakis is interested in, who does not specify the instruments precisely, but only gives indications of texture and register. It is not strictly speaking based on the purely rhythmic work that the composition is based either. No complex values cherished by serial composers or subtle superimpositions of rhythms. The discourse is organized on a regular impulse, even if it varies during the course of the piece, with all parts clearly referring to it.

What the composer does, on the other hand, is a work of varying the density of the different groups, both vertically and horizontally, requiring from the performer a great virtuosity, the charm of the music seeming paradoxically to emanate from the sonic and rhythmic asceticism, which gives it an almost incantatory aspect.

It is the woods and skins that open the piece. A first section develops from a dialogue between the medium group, at first dominant, and the high-pitched group with a more lively rhythm, which gradually takes over, but is abruptly interrupted by the low-pitched, very aggressive group. The three groups then seem to balance each other, leading to a section based on a single instrument from each group, violently piercing the silence that has become preponderant. The movement then resumes, integrating the metals, while the discourse uses more and more frequent repetitions and gradually tightens in prolonged rolls. It is then that the lowest instrument emerges, in a regular and sustained beat, with violent and irregular accents, which concludes the piece in force, supported by the high-pitched metals which only appear at this moment.

## **REBONDS A & B (1988) - 12'** **Iannis Xenakis**

**Dedicatees:** Sylvio Gualda

**World Premiere:** 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1988, Italy, Roma, Festival Roma  
Europa, Villa Medici, by Sylvio Gualda.

**Instrumental set:** 1 percussionist

**Publisher:** Salabert

*Rebonds* is built in two large sections A and B, with no fixed order of play. They use a slightly different instrumentarium: the first one uses only the skins, while the second one introduces in addition the five wood-blocks. Unlike the other works in this program, *Rebonds* is part of a group of works (*Pléiades, Idmen B*), where greater rhythmic regularity is asserted.

Part A evolves in an irregular musical structure, resulting in a kind of perpetual movement.

Part B, on the other hand, is characterized by a regular bongo rhythm that is broken by the bass drum with staggered accents, the five wood-blocks interrupting the speech several times in a faster tempo.

With very few exceptions, the nuance is always *fff*.

The way Xenakis writes for the percussion does not look for solutions in the resonances, it voluntarily limits itself to the impact. As with *Varèse*, the great forerunner in this field, the use of percussion is one of the many ways Xenakis uses to get off the beaten track of traditional sound pitches. If a reference had to be chosen in this musical conception, it is less in our civilization but rather in the memory of extra-European music that Xenakis' work seems to take its root, by its very primitive violence.

## **OKHO (1989) - 14'** **Iannis Xenakis**

**Dedicatees:** Trio Le Cercle

**World Premiere:** 20<sup>th</sup> of October 1989, Paris, festival d'Automne, Opéra Comique, by trio Le Cercle (Willy Coquillat, Jean-Pierre Drouet, Gaston Sylvestre)

**Instrumental set:** 3 percussionists

**Publisher:** Salabert

Composed on the occasion of the bicentenary of the French Revolution, *Okho* is composed for three musicians playing djembe and bass drum and was premiered at the Festival d'Automne in Paris on October 20, 1989. Xenakis' encounter with the West African djembe took place when he came to the studio of the trio Le Cercle, to which this piece is dedicated. We find in *Okho* a rare balance between the visceral and the cerebral, creating a kind of tribal modernism. The work is composed of eight sections containing extremely restricted rhythmic material, recombined in solos, duets and trios.

## **IDMEN A & B (1985) - 28'** **Iannis Xenakis**

**Commission:** French Ministry of Culture (Music Department)

**Dedicatees:** Les Percussions de Strasbourg

**World Premiere:** 24<sup>th</sup> of July 1985, Strasbourg

**Instrumental set:** Idmen A - 4 percussionists + choir

Idmen B - 6 percussionists + choir

**Publisher:** Salabert

«We know (=Idmen) how to tell lies similar to the truths».

The Muses : around 27

«...we also know how to tell truths similar to lies.»

Iannis Xenakis

«IDMEN» consists of three sequences.

The percussion uses a set of skins ranging from several pairs of bongos to bass drums, timpani, tom-toms of different calibers, tumbas and 6 sets of wood-blocks.

Iannis Xenakis

## Les Percussions de Strasbourg, half a century of creations

Founded in 1962, the Percussions de Strasbourg are world-renowned ambassadors of musical creation. With their exceptional repertoire, the group performs twentieth century masterpieces and commissioned new works with the same concerns: to bring life to a contemporary heritage while revisiting it constantly, and to continue to innovate in a context of artistic diversification.

Since its foundation, the group still stands at the heart of creation, thanks to its particular connections with contemporary composers and the diversity of its abilities in terms of musical formats: from duo to octet, from acoustics to electronics, from recitals to musical theater and dance, etc...

Having been dedicated more than 350 works, the group continues to maintain and develop its unique instrumentarium in the world. It has recorded many times and has received around thirty international awards, including a «Victoire de la musique classique» in 2017, which the Percussions de Strasbourg label won for its first record release, *Burning Bright* by Hugues Dufourt.

The daily commitment of the ensemble to educational activities is reflected in their various actions, particularly with the public in Théâtre de Hautepierre where the ensemble is in residence.



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Kore at the Festival Milano Musica



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