

Persephassa
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Pléiades
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Xenakis
LES
PERCUSSIONS
DE STRASBOURG

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Iannis XENAKIS — Pléiades (1979)

COMMISSIONED BY the City of Strasbourg
DEDICATED TO: Les Percussions de Strasbourg
FIRST PERFORMANCE: 3 May 1979 in Mulhouse

01.	Pléiades - Mélanges	08:31
02.	Pléiades - Claviers	09:43
03.	Pléiades - Métaux	13:14
04.	Pléiades - Peaux	11:06

Iannis XENAKIS — Persephassa (1969)

COMMISSIONED BY the French Ministry of Cultural Affairs and the Shiraz-Persepolis Arts Festival
DEDICATED TO: Les Percussions de Strasbourg
FIRST PERFORMANCE: 9 September 1969 at the Shiraz-Persepolis Arts Festival (Iran)

05.	Persephassa	29:02
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TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE SPATIALISATION OF THE SOUND,
THE USE OF HEADPHONES IS RECOMMENDED FOR A FULL IMMERSION.



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TOTAL DURATION: 71:41
Recorded on 17 & 20 July 2021 at the Théâtre de Hautepierre, Strasbourg, France
Edition: "Pléiades", de Iannis Xenakis© Salabert - "Persephassa", de Iannis Xenakis© Salabert

Recorded in agreement with Durand-Salabert-Eschig publishing house
Interpretation by Les Percussions de Strasbourg
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2021, Les Percussions de Strasbourg

© Vincent Arbelet

Les Percussions de Strasbourg
With Minh-Tâm Nguyen, Alexandre Esperet, François Papirer, Thibaut Weber,
Hsin Hsuan Wu, Yi-Ping Yang.

PRODUCTION: Les Percussions de Strasbourg
ARTISTIC DIRECTION OF LES PERCUSSIONS DE STRASBOURG: Minh-Tâm Nguyen
ARTISTIC DIRECTION OF THE RECORDING: Jean Geoffroy
SOUND RECORDING: Franck Rossi
MIX: Jean Geoffroy, Minh-Tâm Nguyen and Franck Rossi
TECHNICIAN: Claude Mathia

COVER PHOTOGRAPHY: Christophe Urbain
TEXTS: Anne-Sylvie Barthel-Calvet and Jean Geoffroy
ARTWORK: Le Futur
TRANSLATION: Philip Clarke
PRODUCTION: Maud Repiquet, Léa Pfohl and Eloi de Verneuil
SPECIAL THANKS TO: Rythmes & Sons, Paul Gueib, and l'École des Arts et Métiers de Metz and Yamaha



2021, enregistrement de P&Klades

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READINGS AND NEW READINGS

by Jean Geoffroy

In between these two terms, over 50 years have elapsed, probably the most noteworthy years in the repertoire and evolution of Western percussion.

Beyond the recording, what these pieces present to the listener is a movement, the evolution of how a score is viewed, an evolution carried by interpreters and ensembles the world over in their performances over the years, the score evolving from one ensemble, one concert, to the next, rendering any idea of reference obsolete. Through their writing, a composer, like any creative artist, gives the performer the possibility of taking over the movement where they have left off, leaving it up to the interpreter to give it a fresh dynamic, a new impetus.

Today, this impetus stems from the Percussion de Strasbourg, a group rich in its diversity but fully connected to a shared and appropriated overall vision. It stems from a personified, generous sound by musicians emancipated from technical difficulties, whose sole ambition is to recreate the prodigious structures put forward by Xenakis in these two pieces, each knowing their place as an essential link in the overall architecture which surpasses them, but which they are called on to transcend. This impetus is also the ability of each performer to learn from and be surprised by the work they are playing, finding their place in the fragile equilibrium between an interpretation's intelligence and its instinctual, intuitive requirements.

First and foremost, however, this impetus stems from an encounter. It is commonly said that music is the art of the encounter; between a performer and "the dream, the vision" of a composer, one perceiving elements which the other struggles to detect, but who has the means to translate them into sound, to share them with a wide audience. This relationship can only make sense if both do their part, precious moments when together they somehow define the space and place of the performer, whatever the score. These are the moments which alone justify our commitment as musicians.

Regardless of whether it is an original production or not, by a composer dead or alive, the stakes for the performer remain the same, an interpretation can never be other than a re-creation, a new reading, far from the reproduction of a model, however striking it may be.

As for a new piece, it is always a matter of coming back to one's first sensations, one's first contact with the work, moments which are often unforgettable and will condition all subsequent practice, and with which one must never part. It is the only way to keep this freshness, this ambition of pleasure in playing, of keeping the work moving. Holding on to the wild sensations experienced during the first readings of a piece probably conditions the strength of the interpretation: to play here and now. This is how the group approached this recording, and this is why we will all remember these few days fondly.

PERSEPHASSA

WRITING

CHAOS...

by Jean Geoffroy

The first few bars say it all, everything is concentrated here: the power of the sound, its complexity, but above all its relation to space. The musicians find themselves the instrument of a mechanism which appears relentlessly vertical, made of clashes and contrasts. As soon as it is played, each beat or rhythm is immediately contradicted, stopped dead, be it by other rhythms or other tempi, sometimes very progressively when each musician plays on a different beat, sometimes in a more sudden manner through complex rhythmical superpositions, as if each new idea scarcely pronounced could no longer follow its own development.

The strength of this work does not come from the power of the performers per se, but from the multitude of temporal distortions generated by these polyrhythms.

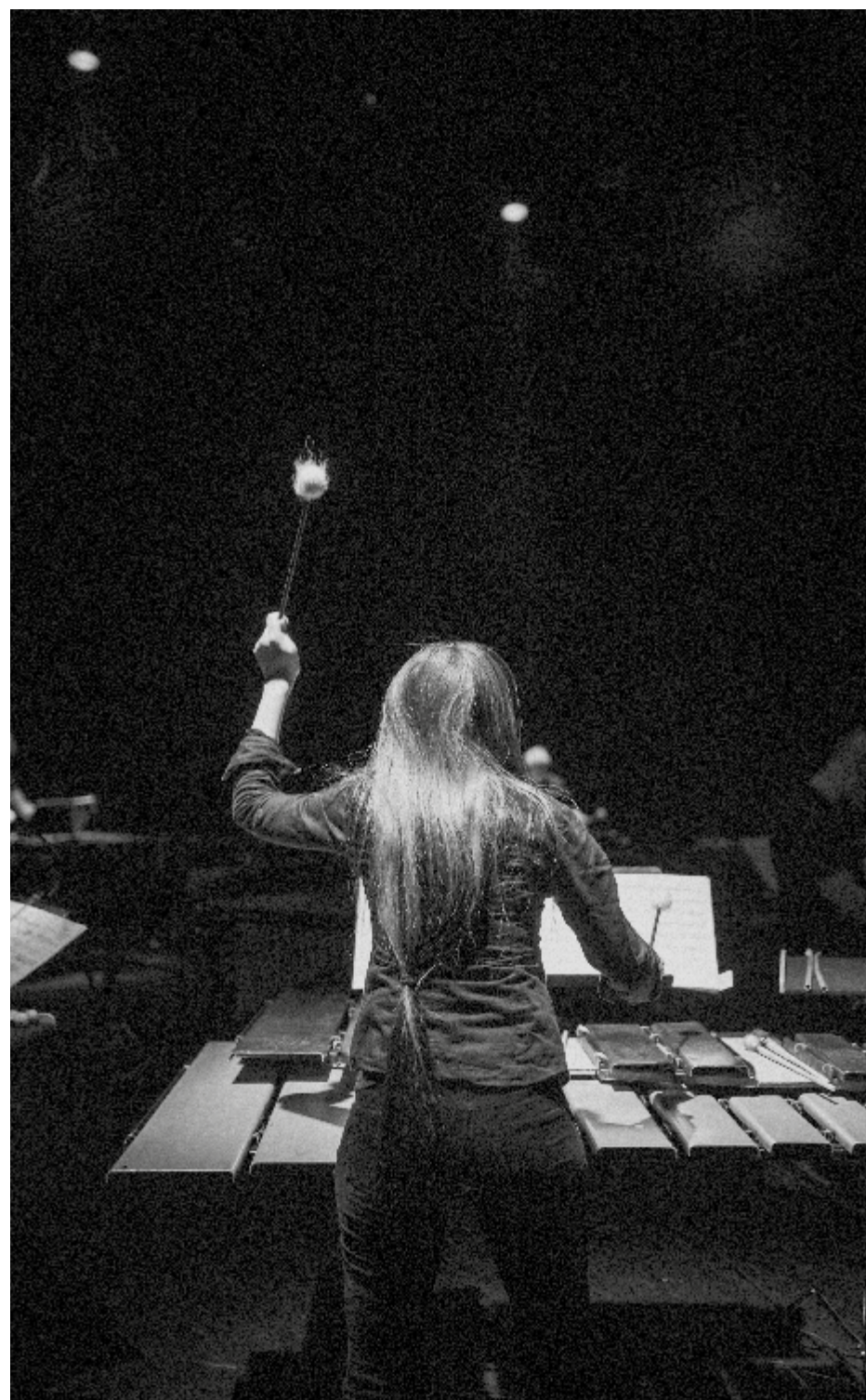
Persephassa is above all six voices which keep clashing, contradicting one another, whatever the dynamic, the instrument or the playing technique, but also six discourses which sometimes meet in a sort of rhythmical counterpoint, allowing the listener to follow one or the other, like sentences expressed in Morse code, distant voices sometimes barely audible. We encounter these voices in the final carousel-like passage, thrown from one musician to the other, in one direction then the other, an ultimate counterpoint where all sounds and materials – wood, skins, metal – contribute to the final blaze.

Persephassa is definitely a piece with multiple entryways for the listener, a landscape to construct and deconstruct, to discover and rediscover endlessly.

Recording *Persephassa* is a challenge in itself as this piece is above all an intimate adventure to be experienced with closed eyes from the centre of the setup. The concept is to put the listener "conductor" in the centre, surrounded by six percussion sets. The listener can

either intentionally seek out one sound or another or let themselves be taken by surprise by sounds as they appear in front, to the side or from behind. To take advantage of this privileged position, the use of headphones is recommended for a full immersion.

© Xenakis, Bayreuth



2021, enregistrement de Péladon

PLEIADES, WRITING MULTITUDE...

by Jean Geoffroy



2021, enregistrement de Pléiades

© Jesus s. Bapetista

When playing *Pléiades*, we are immediately transported, as if swept up by these rhythms pushing us forward. It is an immediate jubilation of sound, rhythm, and movement. When one movement stops, another takes over, a rhythm is established and as though through a magnifying glass, we step into its complexity where we discover a scattering of the initial beat, of which some original elements remain here and there, disappearing progressively to give way to new spaces. Richness and profusion of colours, movements and rhythms, *Pléiades* is all of these at once.

Each of the parts *Claviers* (Keyboards), *Peaux* (Skins) and *Métaux* (Metals) presents its own singular vision of this “scattering of particles” of which it is composed. The scatterings are provoked by inserts which in a way reshuffle the cards, disrupting an announced movement, distorting it anew, taking it further, driving the use of endlessly different dynamics which structure this exponential evolution.

At certain points, certain homorhythms appear to have the upper hand, developing their own language, but it is to better highlight this “particulate” richness and the new upcoming dispersion, always with a whirling and joyous energy.

We come across this energy in a more surprising manner in *Métaux* (Metals), a piece written for six sixxens, metal keyboards specially imagined by Xenakis for this piece, and also present in *Mélanges* (Mixtures). Somewhere between bells and the Balinese gamelan, this instrument carries us into a seemingly unstoppable whirlwind.

To record *Métaux*, the Percussions de Strasbourg partnered with Paul Gueib who recreated the design of these new sixxens. They were built by Rythmes & Sons based on Xenakis’ original models.

“A score of his handed to the performers has one main quality: it is beyond question. It is precise, it does not cheat and one cannot cheat with it. It presents natural gestures which, even if they require physical and intellectual exertion, certainly do not lead to inept phenomena”.*

JEAN BATIGNE

* Founder of les Percussions de Strasbourg.
Extract from *Regards sur Iannis Xenakis*, Paris, Stock, 1981



2021, enregistrement de Pléiades

© Jesus s. Bapetista

Writing “multitude” calls upon the inclusion of a movement in the image of the other three parts, surprising, exponential, and generous. *Mélanges* (Mixtures) puts the entire work into perspective, as though, after the three nebulae *Claviers-Peaux-Métaux*, we could view them from afar as one cluster of particles. Using quotes endlessly transformed and distorted, derived from the other three parts, Xenakis plays with them, overlaying them, opposing them, deconstructing them in a jubilatory manner, a jubilation of playing by the performers as well as a jubilation for the listener who rediscovers here pieces of faraway spaces, colours present in the other three parts.

Like for *Persephassa*, the objective of this recording is to place the listener as close to the players as possible through the sound spatialisation of different percussion sets. These are placed in a circle with the listener at the centre of the setup. Once again, the use of headphones is recommended to perceive the space generated by this spatialisation.

In the richness of these two works, we find an incredibly large and open range of play and appropriation for the performers. In *Persephassa*, the interpreter is an element of the relentless mechanism, subjected to

a controlled structure; in *Pléiades*, the performer drives events, personifying them and carrying them as this movement inescapably pushes us forward. But in both these pieces, the group’s pleasure as it plays and in its sound remain the same, and beyond the pieces themselves, this is what comes across in this interpretation by the Percussions de Strasbourg, this recording in itself defining the ensemble in its cohesion, its willingness, its imagination, its enthusiasm and its talent.

Between the historical recordings of the 1970s and today, there is only one short step, which builds on those trodden by the four generations that have played a part in this wild adventure, one further step like a baton passed down from generation to generation, if only to ensure that the movement initiated by all the composers who have written for the Percussions de Strasbourg, Iannis Xenakis high among them, will never stop.

1986, Recording of *Pleiades*

© archives Percussions de Strasbourg

“When I write for you, it will be a fundamental work for percussion”*

IANNIS XENAKIS

* Extracts from *Regards sur Iannis Xenakis*, Paris, Stock, 1981

CREATING NEW SOUND WORLDS TOGETHER: XENAKIS AND THE PERCUSSIONS DE STRASBOURG

by Anne-Sylvie
Barthel-Calvet

There have been many unique encounters in the history of music between composers and performers, or even groups of performers, their interactions providing the stimulus for mutual inspiration. Although he was neither a conductor nor an instrumentalist, Iannis Xenakis (1922-2001) was fortunate enough to have collaborated with many musicians who premiered and then regularly performed his very demanding scores.

Within this circle, the Percussions de Strasbourg occupy a special place. Coming together on 8 June 1959 for a performance in Strasbourg of Pierre Boulez's *Visage Nuptial* conducted by Charles Bruck, the six percussionists, members of the Municipal Orchestra (which became the Strasbourg Philharmonic Orchestra in 1972) and the Strasbourg Radio Symphony Orchestra (which disbanded in 1974), came up with the idea of forming an independent ensemble. The group officially performed for the first time on 17 January 1962 under the name *Groupe Instrumental à Percussion de Strasbourg*. Its founding members were

Jean Batigne, Jean-Paul Finkbeiner, Claude Ricou, Georges Van Gucht, Bernard Balet and Lucien Droeller, the latter two being replaced by Gabriel Bouchet and Détélev Kieffer from 1964 onwards. Their aim was to initiate a specific repertoire for this particular form of ensemble, performing new works using only percussion instruments or in combination with orchestra, electronics, music theatre and ballet. Twelve years later, their repertoire included 65 works, most of which were written especially for them. Since then, their number has grown steadily to almost four hundred works. The Percussions de Strasbourg were eager to bring these pieces to audiences who were not used to classical concerts, and in 1967 they formed a partnership with the French Ministry of Cultural Affairs to perform in deprived areas of large cities. They also developed an educational programme with the opening of a school in 1973 and the development of Percustra, an innovative method of learning music through the use of percussion instruments.



Portrait de Xenakis

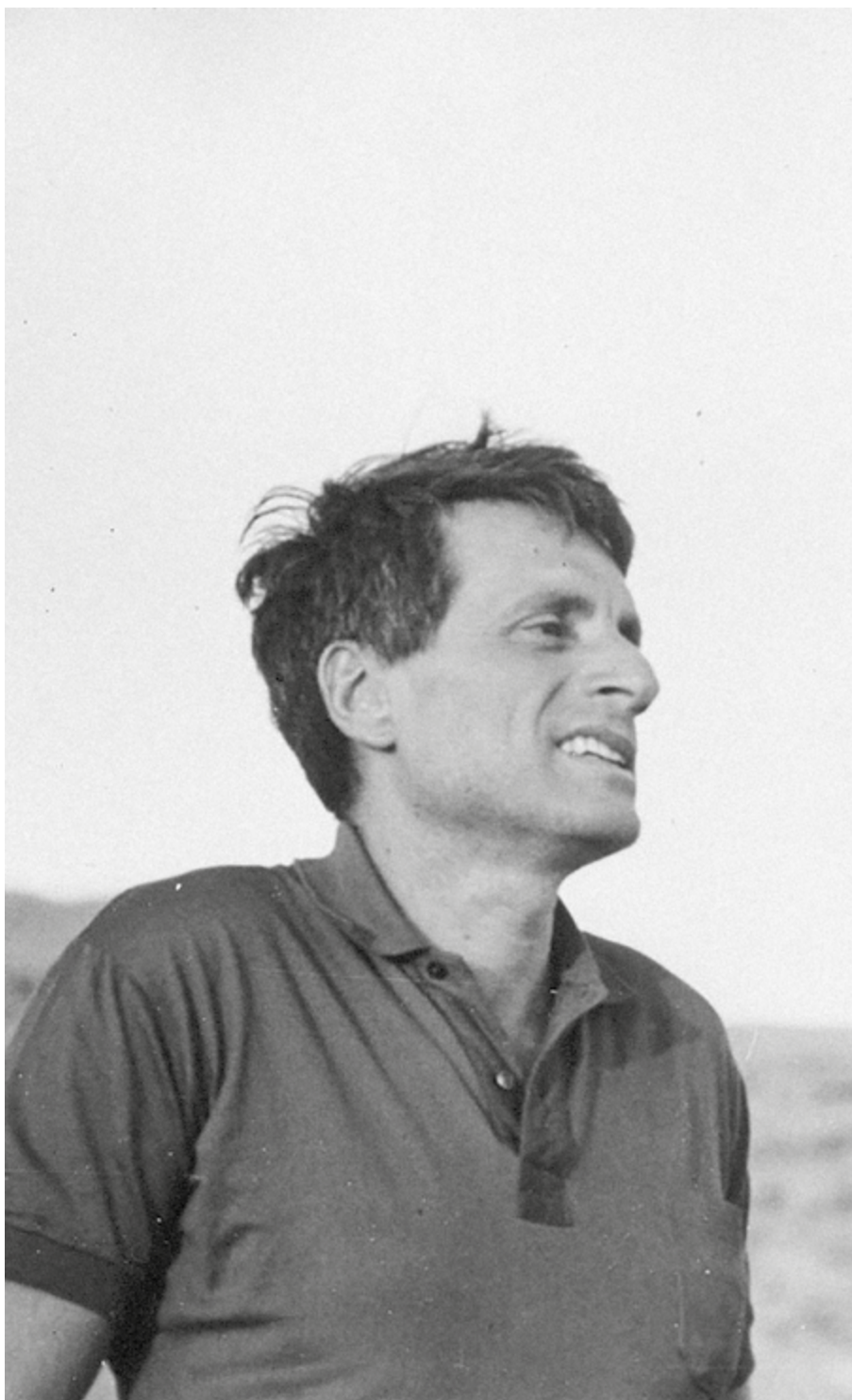
© Michele Daniele, famille Xenakis

When, in 1968, they commissioned *Persephassa* from Iannis Xenakis, then a rising star on the contemporary music scene, they had no idea that in 2022 their successors would choose to celebrate the ensemble's 60th anniversary with this work! Unable to travel due to his teaching duties at Indiana University in Bloomington, USA, Xenakis had just triumphed *in absentia* at the Festival de Royan with the premiere of *Nuits*, a work for twelve a cappella soloists, which the audience - in a rare occurrence - had encored. He became one of the featured composers at this annual event starting from 1966 when, for *Terretektorh*, he placed the audience on beach chairs between the musicians arranged in a circle around the German conductor Hermann Scherchen. It was Scherchen who had first "believed in" Xenakis a decade earlier, and who had published and performed him untiringly until his death a month after that memorable performance.

Born into a well-to-do and cultured family belonging to the Greek diaspora in Romania, Xenakis entered the Polytechnic School of Athens in 1940, shortly before the outbreak of war. From that moment on, the war would determine the course of his life and his studies: Xenakis joined the Resistance, first against the Germans and then against the British army during the events of December 1944. Seriously wounded in the face on 1 January 1945, he finished his studies at the beginning of 1947 and arrived in Paris illegally in November of the same year. On the recommendation of Georges Candilis, he managed to get a job as an engineering assistant at Le Corbusier's architectural studio. Little by little, he developed a taste for architecture and was involved in major projects such as the *Couvent de la Tourette* and the Philips Pavilion, which he actually designed alone for the 1958 Universal Exhibition in Brussels. Relations became strained with Le Corbusier, who fired him in 1959. At the same time, shortly after his arrival

in France, he continued his musical studies and attended Olivier Messiaen's classes as an unregistered student from 1951 to 1954, which introduced him, in particular, to twentieth century music. After experimenting with serialism in *Metastasis* (two thirds of which in fact use an innovative serial idiom), he felt that it ultimately led to an impasse, a dead end that he went on to denounce in "The Crisis of Serial Music", a famous article published by Hermann Scherchen in his *Gravesaner Blätter* journal. From *Pithoprakta* onwards, Xenakis made use of probabilistic distributions as a means of organising the evolution of sound masses. Having gained access, thanks to Messiaen, to the GRM studios, he began to experiment with striking 'electromagnetic' realisations (as they were called at the time) by juxtaposing very short sounds. From one work to the next, Xenakis's research advanced very quickly: in 1963, he set out the theories he had developed over the previous seven years with the publication of his book *Musiques formelles*. After using the laws of probability, he then embarked from 1964 onwards on a new field of rigorous formalisation drawing on algebraic structures that enabled him, on the one hand, to combine different musical parameters and, on the other, using a powerful formal tool that he called "sieves", to generate pitch scales and rhythmic sequences. Xenakis gradually integrated the musical structures generated by these principles of formalisation into his style and began to compose more and more spontaneously: *Nuits* is thus a work written entirely "manually", so to speak, without recourse to complex mathematical principles.





“Here is a man who, by spanning time, would force the centuries to join hands.”✂

JEAN BATIGNE

* Extracts from *Regards sur Iannis Xenakis*, Paris, Stock, 1981

THE SPATIALISATION OF RHYTHM: PERSEPHASSA

by Anne-Sylvie Barthel-Calvet

2019, Persephassa à Milano Musica

© Margherita Busacca



Upon hearing *Nuits*, Mehdi Bousheri, one of the organisers of the Shiraz-Persepolis Arts Festival, was immediately captivated. Such was his enthusiasm that he included it in the 1968 summer programme and wanted to commission an original work for the 1969 edition. The latter was devoted to percussion: traditional music ensembles from all over the world were invited (Bali, Brazil, Iran, India, Romania, Rwanda, etc.) and, for western music, the Percussions de Strasbourg. Their concert, scheduled for 9 September, included two new works: *États* for violin and six percussionists by Betsy Jolas and *Persephassa* by Xenakis. Both works were commissioned by the Festival des Arts and the French Ministry of Cultural Affairs. After spending the summer preparing in Alsace, the Strasbourg players headed out to Persepolis for a final evening rehearsal with Xenakis in the imposing site of the Apadana. The six groups of instruments were arranged in a circle between the remains of the columns of the Palace of Darius, but the sound was lost in the highly absorbent acoustics of the desert. As Jean Batigne wrote at the time: "Wearing half-moon glasses, the score on his knees or on a case, Xenakis listens. The group stops during a

passage. He says nothing. The musicians are puzzled. (...) Xenakis puts down his score, takes off his glasses, and assumes the role of a real site manager, directing a team of Iranian workers, getting them to move the platforms, bringing them closer together, transporting the instruments, still saying nothing, attaching microphones to the stands, and setting up the sound system in the large space of the Apadana³.” According to various accounts, the audience was allowed to move around during the performance, as did Empress Farah Pahlavi who attended the concert. The Paris premiere took place on 26 October 1969 in the foyer of the Palais de Chaillot theatre, as part of the Journées de Musique Contemporaine organised by Maurice Fleuret

With *Persephassa*, Xenakis continued to develop his concept of what he called ‘sound kinematics’ which he had begun with *Terretektorh* and *Nomos Gamma* (premiered in Royan in 1966 and 1969 respectively). Since the beginning of the 1950s, the possibility of simulating the spatial motion of sound had sparked the curiosity of composers, first in the electroacoustic field, with the proliferation of sound sources made possible by sound recording technology, and later in the instrumental field. Xenakis himself had experimented with the “sound routes” that he had created in 1958 inside the Philips Pavilion for Varèse’s *Poème électronique* and his own *Interlude Sonore* (later renamed as *Concret PH*). The illusion of sound moving through the acoustic space was achieved by the progressive fading in and out between neighbouring loudspeakers. In 1966, he applied this principle to the instrumental field in his composition *Terretektorh* that featured an orchestra dispersed among the audience. He used it again in *Persephassa*, but also developed other, more complex spatial schemes. For the purposes of sound kinematics, the six percussionists are arranged in the regular shape of a hexagon that surrounds the audience and use instruments of similar timbre. In 1969, Xenakis had to adapt the work to the instruments available to the Percussions de Strasbourg, hence the small differences in the instrumentation indicated in the original score. Nowadays, each of the six percussionists has exactly the same set of instruments, comprising the four primary materials: skin, wood (wood-block, simantra, maracas), metal (simantra, cymbal, gong and tam tam), and stone (pebbles), to which is sporadically added the sliding pitch of sirens. These timbres, their contrasts and their combinations are



1971, Xenakis à Persépolis

© Malie Letrange, famille Xenakis

the determining factors in the overall structuring of the work divided into three main parts.

With the title *Persephassa* (the archaic name of Persephone, the goddess of the seasons, representing the eternal cycle of Nature’s death and rebirth), Xenakis wanted, as he explained in the preface to the score, to explore “the period, the iteration, the very essence of the theory of numbers and of Mathematics”. It is in effect the first work in which he made extensive use in the temporal domain of the periodic structures created by integer-sequence generators that he called “sieves”. These can be superpositions of very simple structures with short periodicity, which Xenakis compared to cogwheels, or complex, irregular structures with long periodicity, constructed with mathematical operations such as intersection, union and complementation. Throughout the three main parts of *Persephassa*, rhythmic variations are thereby developed, drawing on different forms of these “sieves” and giving rise to the subtle play of temporal and spatial shifts.

The first part, devoted exclusively to the dry timbres of the skin instruments, presents a succession of sequences, each of which evolves with increasing complexity and density. Xenakis superimposes an interplay of sound spatialisations by distributing the six skin instrument timbres either over the entire circumference of the circle, or concentrated on one half, or even on one or two points, an interplay that also evolves with increasing speed and entropy. At the end of these episodes, drum rolls that pass from one

percussionist to the next sweep through the acoustic space with their energy.

The contrast between the timbres and rhythmic structures of the second main part is radically different to the unity of the instrumental colour of the first. The second section plays on the superimposition of different tempi and metres for each percussionist and gradually introduces metallic timbres, first as a way of punctuating the passages played by the skin instruments, then in a more prominent manner with crackling metal simanders, then with wooden simanders, leading to a chaotic sequence superimposing the rolling of the skin instruments and the saturated spectral clouds of cymbals and tam-tams, and the glissandi of sirens. Before this last section, the organisation of the sequences differed greatly from the first part: separated by long silences (the duration of which is precisely indicated), some of them allow sporadic sounds to emerge, as in the central section of *Nuits*, for which Xenakis said that he wanted “to construct a musical time that would recreate chance”, as in “a tropical forest, where no rhythmic coordination can be detected in the actions of the beings that live there⁴.” Some of the sounds in this passage from *Persephassa* have a decidedly naturalistic connotation.

The final ‘merry-go-round’ - as the Percussions de Strasbourg affectionately call it - is perhaps the most well-known part of the work. It is at this point that Xenakis transforms the speed of sound rotations into a truly musical parameter. To ensure the continuity of sound necessary for the perception of motion, he mimics –

instrumentally – the process of fading in and out of the loudspeakers: while one instrument plays a *descrescendo*, the next on the circle begins to play a *crescendo* to reach the maximum dynamic indicated at the moment when the preceding instrument stops; this player then begins a *decrescendo* while the next one begins a *crescendo* and so on. Xenakis gradually introduces several percussion timbres that pass from one instrumentalist to the next, culminating in the superimposition of seven lines, only one of which is a skin instrument. Increasing the tempo by degrees, he makes them rotate more and more rapidly clockwise and anti-clockwise. The audience is surrounded by a veritable vortex where the sound initially rotates over a period of twelve seconds and finally in one and a half seconds! The acceleration leads abruptly to silence. After this break, chaos ensues in the final bars where disordered rotations of rolls alternate with “waves” of clattering pebble sounds, the primary sound on which the thirty or so minutes of rhythmic structures of *Persephassa* come to an end.

3 — J. Batigne, « Sur *Persephassa* et *Périades* », *Regards sur Iannis Xenakis*, H. Gerhards (éd.), Paris, Stock, 1981, p. 182.

4 — I. Xenakis in conversation with J.-R. Julien, « *Nuits* d’Iannis Xenakis. Éléments d’une analyse », *L’Éducation musicale* vol. 326, p. 11.

1971, Xenakis à Persépolis

© Malie Letrange, famille Xenakis





1969, rehearsal of Persephassa at Persepolis Festival

© Archives Percussions de Strasbourg

“I was delighted to rehearse with the group throughout the night, on the Apadana of the Persepolis Palace, in a spirit of intense artistic cooperation and with an exceptional force of will.”*

IANNIS XENAKIS

* Extracts from *Regards sur Iannis Xenakis*, Paris, Stock, 1981

“For almost sixty years, the Percussions de Strasbourg has been gathering musicians who are now representative of every continent. It has expanded the Western sound beyond its boundaries. Besides the technical achievements and the originality of a repertoire that nothing connects to the past, the group has given a consistency to seemingly heterogeneous material and melted it into a single blend.”

HUGUES DUFOURT

2021, recording of *Pleiades*

© Jesus s. Baptista

THE THOUSAND COLOURS OF PLEIADES

by Anne-Sylvie Barthel-Calvet

1979, *Pleiades* at the Lille Festival with the sixcons' first version

© Archives Percussions de Strasbourg



Eight years later, Xenakis was again asked to work with the Percussions de Strasbourg. In the interlude, he had had the opportunity, thanks to his friend Maurice Fleuret, to discover the world of Indonesian percussion music. In December 1972 to January 1973, Henry-Louis de La Grange and Maurice Fleuret invited their friends Betsy Jolas, Iannis Xenakis, Marie-Françoise Bucquet, Tōru Takemitsu and their spouses on a musical trip to the islands of Bali and Java to discover the most famous gamelans described by the musicologist Colin McPhee in his book *Music In Bali*. Betsy Jolas recalls that Xenakis recorded everything he could on a tape recorder. The discovery of this music, the gamelan instrumentarium, the particular *pelog* and *slendro* scales and the resulting harmonic structures had an undeniable impact on Xenakis's compositional practice in the years that followed, as evidenced, among other things, by the beginning of *Jonchaies* and perhaps to a greater extent, *Pléiades*.

The composition of this four-movement work was commissioned by the City of Strasbourg for the

Ballet du Rhin and the Percussions de Strasbourg. The choreographical programme entrusted to Germinal Casado, who entitled it *Le Concile Musical*, is based on the alternation of Xenakis' four movements played live by the Percussions de Strasbourg and twelve previously recorded pieces for brass instruments by Giovanni Gabrieli, with the choreographic style and the scenario changing depending on the type of music. The premiere of the ballet show took place on 3 May 1979 in Mulhouse, followed by the premiere of the instrumental version, coupled with *Persephassa*, on 23 November at the Lille Festival.

For *Pléiades*, Xenakis recommended in the score a reverse layout to the one used in *Persephassa*, that is, with the audience seated around the six percussionists, and since 2017, the Percussions de Strasbourg have performed this piece in a circle. Xenakis develops a greater complexity of metric shifts than in *Persephassa* and pays a great deal of attention to the harmonic resources of instruments with specific pitches, which were absent from the

1979, Première de *Pléiades* avec le ballet national de Mulhouse

© Archive des Percussions de Strasbourg

previous work. The relationship with the performers in this piece also differs somewhat from that of *Persephassa*, as the players are actively involved in shaping the work: they can choose the order of the four movements (entitled “Métaux”, “Peaux”, “Claviers” and “Mélanges”) as well as deciding the pitches – and the perceived harmonic resonances that will thereby emerge – to be used for the scale of the Sixxens, the instruments created especially for the “Métaux” movement.

The outcome of an unprecedented collaboration between instrument maker, performer and composer, the set of Sixxens (a blend between the word “six”, for the six musicians, and “xen”, for Xenakis) was built by Robert Hébrard (whose name unfortunately does not appear in the instrument’s designation). Each instrument has nineteen metal bars made of an aluminium-based alloy, corresponding to freely chosen notes tuned microtonally with $1/4$

and $1/3$ tones or their multiples. This arrangement is repeated but slightly altered from one instrument to another, as is the case in the Balinese gamelan. Xenakis states in the score: “It is even recommended that these six notes, taken two by two, should not be in unison, the difference being between $+3/4$ and $-3/4$ of a tone of the given pitch”. These micro-shifts in pitch allow complex harmonic spectra to emerge, depending on the notes chosen, through superimpositions of sound layers following independent, often irrational metric structures (seven semiquavers in the space of six, etc.). Of the entire work, the “Metals” movement is the most closely related to Balinese music. In addition to the work on pitches, the rapid permutations of certain notes evoke the instrumental play of these ensembles.

Written for three vibraphones and three xylophones (more precisely, a marimba, a xylophone and a xylorimba),

“Claviers” is also a tribute to Balinese music. Each instrumental group has different pitch scales and rhythmic structures which, besides the reference to this repertoire, draw on it for creative potential. Starting with a passage played in unison by the three vibraphones, Xenakis brings out harmonic shimmering through rhythmic micro-shifts alone, rather than through pitch shifts as in “Métaux”. In a flurry of rapid rhythmic patterns, the xylophones then introduce another pitch scale, borrowed from the Balinese pelog which had already been used in *Jonchaies*. The interactions between these two structures, particularly the superimposition of irrational rhythms, highlight the unsuspected harmonic resources of these types of percussion instruments.

The “Peaux” movement recalls the energy of *Persephassa* and *Psappha*, composed three years earlier for a single percussionist. Using polymetric

structures only briefly, its dynamism is primarily rooted in binary rhythms and their variations (subdivisions, shifting accents, and permutations of short and long values).

Composed last, the “Mélanges” movement, like a mosaic, juxtaposes and superimposes short sequences taken from the other movements, creating new sound combinations. Depending on its position among the four movements, this section takes on different functions in the overall scheme of the work: as the last, it plays on reminiscences; as an introduction, it opens up the sound worlds that are to be explored; as an intermediary element, it provides contrast via its rich diversity.

1986, Xenakis et les sixxens, enregistrement de *Pléiades*

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By turning to Xenakis, the Percussions de Strasbourg gave him the opportunity to develop creative avenues that he had previously been able to explore only sporadically. Lasting thirty and forty-five minutes respectively, these two works are among Xenakis’s longest, adding two major contributions to the percussion ensemble repertoire. They reveal two radically different sound worlds: *Persephassa*, using untreated timbres, focuses on the unfolding of rhythm in various dimensions, including spatial ones, while *Pléiades*, with its incredible palette of timbres, makes rhythm the bedrock on which extraordinary sonorities are sculpted.

THE SIXXENS

1986, enregistrement de *Pléiades*

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Originally designed in 1979 for the Percussions de Strasbourg to play the work *Pléiades*, the sixxen is a metallic instrument with 19 unevenly distributed pitches based on intervals of a quarter or a third of a tone and their multiples.

Its name derives from the number SIX (in reference to the Percussions de Strasbourg, which for many years had six players) and from XEN, the first three letters of Xenakis' name. Six models were designed for the ensemble in such a way that all the sixxens played together would never create any notes sounding in unison. In 1984, Robert

Hébrard and his friend Albert Abitbol, a specialist in metallic materials, designed the third version of the instrument in close collaboration with the musicians and the composer.

"Several versions of the sixxens were built before the one we are familiar with today. There are no standards for these instruments, which sound quite different depending on their construction. We know from personal accounts that Xenakis did not have any specific ideas about how he wanted them to sound. He simply wanted them not to sound 'classical', which is hardly precise! We know that he envisaged them not being made of metal but of very hard porcelain." Philippe Manoury

Since 2021, the Percussions de Strasbourg have been performing on the fourth version of the sixxen designed by Paul Gueib, a student at the École des Arts et Métiers in Metz and manufactured by the company Rythmes et Sons under the supervision of Claude Walter, manager of the Percussions de Strasbourg at the time when *Pléiades* had its first public performance in 1979. The properties of the metal bars and their tuning remain unchanged from the third version but changes in the chassis allow for greater flexibility and more varied ways of playing.





2021, Les Percussions de Strasbourg

© Vincent Arbelot

LES PERCUSSIONS DE STRASBOURG

“They are the crafters
of sounds in
a concrete state,
I craft them in
an abstract state...”⁴⁵

IANNIS XENAKIS

*Extracts from *Regards sur Iannis Xenakis*,
Paris, Stock, 1981

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 theatre 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 Haute-pierre where the ensemble is in residence.