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Critic's Notebook: The music of Greek composer Iannis Xenakis is cold and stern — and so hip

Nine years after his death, he is being treated like a rock star. An exhibition at MOCA Pacific Design Center and a concert at Los Angeles State Historic Park help pay tribute to the esoteric composer.

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Last winter the work of avant-garde Greek composer Iannis Xenakis bled out of the concert hall and into the Drawing Center in New York. That lovely, learned show, "Iannis Xenakis: Composer, Architect, Visionary," opened at MOCA Pacific Design Center over the weekend. And this is the only time I'll use the word "lovely" in relation to a formidable but, of late, bizarrely fashionable composer.

In New York, the late composer (1922-2001) has become a new music rock star — so says the FM classical music station WQXR. Thus it was that in Central Park last summer six percussionists floating on the Boating Lake banged out Xenakis' almost frighteningly peculiar but rocking "Persephassa." His ultra-complex string quartets are played in downtown jazz clubs to eager young audiences.

Now the Xenakis express has headed west. In conjunction with the MOCA opening, a version of "Polytope de Persépolis," an arrestingly powerful electronic music and multimedia spectacle designed for a festival at the historic site in Iran in 1971, was partially re-created at the Los Angeles State Historic Park at sundown Saturday. It attracted a cadre of art world hipsters as well as the electronica devotees who hang out around the expansive Xenakis bins at Amoeba Music.

Sunday at sunset, CalArts staged the West Coast premiere of Xenakis' only opera, "Oresteia," at the campus' new outdoor theater, [the Wild Beast](#). Like "Persépolis," the daunting work was presented free to the public. Despite a cool, windy day that threatened rain, picnickers and even some families flocked to Valencia.

Wild Beast, indeed. Xenakis' music is so overwhelmingly odd that it is nearly indescribable and also pretty much unintelligible. I'd be happy to take suggestions for a major composer in the history of Western music who is more esoteric.

To fully figure out a Xenakis score, a working knowledge of calculus, the physical sciences and architecture are necessary. It doesn't hurt to know two dead languages: ancient Greek and FORTRAN, that of computer programming.

The musical requirements include the chops to subdivide rhythms into complex fractions and pitches into microtones. Be sure to bone up on classical Greek scales and culture.

Finally, if you're not tough, forget it. Ugly sounds are as valuable as beautiful ones in the Xenakis universe. Angry dissonances threaten. Loud means loud. Silences can be even scarier. Luddites, lightweight, wimps and most of all sentimentalists stay home.

So how is it that a composer with so steely an intellect and so little sentiment, one who wrote music of such shockingly cold, hard power, has captured the modern imagination?

The fact is that Xenakis was a romantic revolutionary who comes as close to being an avant-garde superhero as we are ever likely to get. An outsider all his life, Xenakis was born in Romania to refugee Greek parents. He studied math and engineering in Greece and came to music late. A dashing figure, he was a member of the Greek resistance during World War II who lost half of his face when a bomb exploded next to him. As a communist in the Greek civil war that followed, he barely escaped a death sentence and lived as an exile with a price on his head in Paris, unable for many years to return to Greece.

He studied with Olivier Messiaen in the classes with Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen (with whom he ultimately feuded), but also worked a day job in the atelier of the architect Le Corbusier (with whom he also ultimately feuded). "Xenakis is not radically new but radically other," Messiaen said.

But what the MOCA show demonstrates is how beautifully Xenakis combined his many sides in his art. Mathematical calculations morphed into extraordinary graphical and architectural structures that could then be translated into music. Every stage is of great visual and intellectual and, in the musical conclusion, aural interest.

Xenakis liked to make outlandish statements and once told me that musicians and not scientists should have discovered the Second Law of Thermodynamics. A noted chemist and fine cellist also told me that assertion was complete bunk. But the rigor of science and structure was obviously Xenakis' way of coping with a ruthless existence.

"Persépolis" is a mix science and sound. I objected to the high volume of Saturday's rendering, although the crew controlling everything from their laptops defended what they did as realizing Xenakis' intentions with the latest technology. I spent much of the hour listening from afar, where I heard a wash of thick, interesting, living frequencies but was not pummeled by them. Bursts of fire and revolving spots were part of the show, the promised lasers were not. The equipment didn't work.

<http://articles.latimes.com/2010/nov/10/entertainment/la-et-xenakis-notebook-20101109>