

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Colin Currie Group & JACK Quartet Perform Xenakis

Saturday 8 October 2022, 8pm
Queen Elizabeth Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2022/23. This new edition, the first under my curatorship since arriving as Head of Classical Music, celebrates classical music in all its forms with artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

Having spent the majority of my life immersed in classical music, it is a tremendous honour to be leading the programme at the Southbank Centre, and flying the flag for this incredible art form.

We look forward to welcoming you to our spaces.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Iannis Xenakis (1947-97)

Psappha for percussion	15'
Ikhoor for string trio	10'
Tetras for string quartet	17'

Interval

Iannis Xenakis

Mikka for violin	4'
Mikka 'S' for violin	4'
Pléiades for 6 percussionists	45'

Performers

Colin Currie Group:

Colin Currie
Owen Gunnell
Toby Kearney
Catherine Ring
Adrian Spillett
Iris van den Bos

JACK Quartet:

Christopher Otto *violin*
Austin Wulliman *violin*
John Pickford Richards *viola*
Jay Campbell *cello*

Psappha (1975) was Xenakis' first piece for percussion soloist, and groundbreaking in its insistent sense of pulse. According to his own account, it is a transposition into percussive rhythm of how short and long syllables are patterned in the poetry of Sappho, whose name, in an archaic form, gave him his title. Sappho was indeed a virtuoso of metre, with a whole verse form named after her, to be reused by poets from Catullus to our own time. It is hard, however, to trace Sapphic stanzas in Xenakis' composition, which seems much more to connect with contemporary rock music or Japanese drumming.

The notation is unusual: a grid that marks out equal durations, with noteheads placed to show where the attacks should come, hitting the strongly felt beat or letting it pass – or, in the later stages, doubling it. The grid also indicates parts for six groups of instruments, three of wood or skin and three of metal, the last kept in reserve until close to the end. It is for the player to decide what particular instruments to use to execute what the composer laid out as a developing roar through time.

Tetras (1983) was also a first in Xenakis' output, opening a sequence of compositions in which he let his vivid imagination for sound rip through the most venerable instrumental ensemble in western musical culture: the string quartet.

A lot of the piece is wild and raw, including the zigzag glissandos of the opening, begun by the first violin. However, a lot, too, is delicate and subtle. Sounds, of any kind, may be pure events, musical assertions. They may respond to previous events, maintain a dialogue, and thereby depend very directly on their context. They may have an evident expressive force, whether belligerent or withdrawing, sweet or rough. And they may mimic sounds of the exterior world: grunts and cries and mechanical noises. Of course, most of the sounds of the

piece will belong to all these categories at once, some more than others.

Together the sounds unfold a drama, with some scenes that take place within the same décor (notably those concerned primarily with glissandos) and others that are off somewhere new. The up-down sweeps at the start do not get forgotten: they presage not only the later glissando moments but also passages that move in scales or arpeggios – though not scales or arpeggios previously known to humanity. Some of the harmonies are pretty strange, too. But harmonies they are, and they work.

Xenakis' *Persephassa* of 1969 was an early commission of Les Percussions de Strasbourg, the group that made the percussion sextet a standard ensemble. In 1978 Xenakis wrote a second work for them, *Pléiades*, again strongly geared to pulse, but now characterised by how rhythmic ideas, at first strongly defined, are varied as they pass through the ensemble and through time, how regularity is dispersed and regained. 'The sole source of this polyrhythmic composition', Xenakis wrote, 'is the idea of periodicity, repetition, duplication, faithful, pseudo-faithful, unfaithful copy.'

The title refers to the familiar cluster whose bright stars are lightly hazed by a dust cloud. This striking feature of the night sky, observable at some point in the year in all latitudes, has had a place in the mythologies of many peoples, and so makes an apt tutelary spirit for music that is similarly rich in resonances, referring to African and Japanese drumming, to the chiming percussion orchestras of Indonesia, and to the church bells of Europe, as well as to the sound-magic of these and other regions. In Greek myth the Pleiades were seven daughters of Atlas – one of the titans, who battled the Olympian gods and lost – and were changed into stars when their father was condemned to hold up the sky through all

eternity. For the ancient Celts these stars were associated with mourning and the remembrance of the dead.

Xenakis projects his own ceremonial of sound and rhythm through four sections that use different arrays of instruments and play for around ten minutes each. The musicians are free to choose the order, except that the section using all the instruments available has to come first or last.

Colin Currie and his colleagues begin with 'Métaux' (Metals), scored for gongs, tamtams and other metal instruments, including one the composer invented for this piece, the 'sixxen' (taking its name from the number of players and the first syllable of his surname). The six sixxens each have 19 metal plates tuned to notes other than those of the normal scale; moreover, each player's sixxen is tuned slightly differently from the others so that, when they play, what is ostensibly the same note they produce a further kind of haze effect from the discrepant pitches, which interfere with one another to generate beat effects – what the composer described, no doubt with his astronomical title in mind, as 'clouds, nebulae and galaxies of the fragmented dust of beats'.

'Claviers' (Keyboards) introduces the more usual keyed percussion instruments – vibraphone, marimba – in music of simultaneous slow and fast tempos and rippling patterns. 'Peaux' (Skins) is a barrage on drums of different kinds, and is followed by 'Mélanges' (Mixtures), the section for everything on the stage.

Programme note © Paul Griffiths

Find out more

- ▶ Colin Currie Group
- ▶ JACK Quartet
- ▶ southbankcentre.co.uk

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Mahan Esfahani opens a treasure-trove of peculiar, vivid and thrilling little gems for harpsichord by one of music history's great one-offs.

Emerson String Quartet: Shostakovich Cycle - Parts 4 & 5

Tuesday 8 & Wednesday 9 November 2022, 7.30pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

The Emerson Quartet continues its journey through the string quartets of Dmitry Shostakovich, works that reveal the composer's innermost secrets. The performance of Part 5 signals a last farewell to London as the legendary quartet completes its landmark Southbank Centre Shostakovich cycle before retirement.