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MUP529

January 2020

Performance Strategies for Iannis Xenakis' *Psappha*

Approaching multiple percussion music can be overwhelming. There are many things that have to be considered: instrumentation, setup and sticking choice. Each one leads to the next. The instruments that are chosen influence the setup which then influences and decides sticking. Some pieces, like *Psappha* by Iannis Xenakis, do not give the performer a set list of instruments or a diagram of how the piece should be set up. This ambiguity leaves those decisions up to the performer. In order to make educated decisions, the performer needs to know everything they can about the piece and its history. In this essay, I will compare and contrast my personal instrumentation and setup with Sylvio Gualda and Steven Schick along with an analysis of a repeating melodic figure present in the piece.

Understanding the composer is just as important as playing the piece. Iannis Xenakis was born into a musical household in Romania in 1922.¹ Throughout his life, he always loved music, math and architecture.² Xenakis studied composition with Olivier Messiaen who advised him to “not worry about counterpoint and harmony. A person with such a vast mathematical background should take advantage of that in his work.”³ The system of math used in *Psappha*

¹ John Ronald Johnson, “Background and Performance Considerations of Iannis Xenakis' *Psappha*, for Percussion Solo” (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1993), 1.

² Iannis Xenakis, Roberta Brown, John Rahn, “Xenakis on Xenakis,” *Perspectives of New Music* 25, no 1/2, (Summer 1987): 16-63.

³ Johnson, 6.

are called Sieves.⁴ Nothing in the piece repeats in the exact same way. Xenakis reuses material but adds embellishments.

Preparation of *Psappha* requires much more than time in the practice room. This challenging multi-percussion piece utilizes graphic notation instead of the traditional notation. It is challenging because the performer has to learn to read a new, more complex system of notation.⁵ Each instrument group is given a letter A-F which is represented on a horizontal line. Each vertical line represents the pulse. The dots are placed either before or after a vertical line to represent their placement in respect to the overall pulse (see figure 1).⁶ To make *Psappha* more accessible to performers, Owen Rockwell transcribed the piece into the normal music notation.⁷⁸

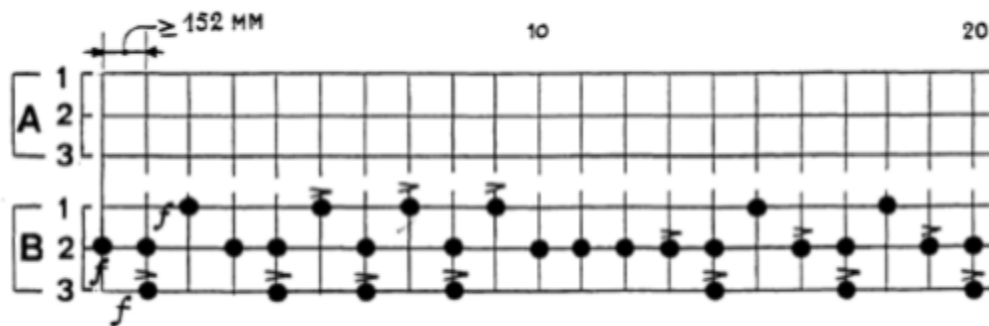


Fig. 1 is an excerpt of the first 20 measure of *Psappha* showing instruments in Group B.

⁴ Owen Phillip Rockwell, "Psappha by Iannis Xenakis: Developing Multiple Percussion Literacy" (DMA Diss., University of Southern Mississippi, 2015), 9.

⁵ Alyssa Gretchen Smith, "An Examination of Notation in Selected Repertoire for Multiple Percussion" (DMA diss., Ohio State University, 2005), 67-77.

⁶ Johnson, 10.

⁷ Rockwell, 78-85.

⁸ All excerpts from this point forward will be from Rockwell's dissertation because it is much simpler to understand than the original graphic notation and therefore easier for the reader to follow.

While Xenakis did not strictly specify certain instruments, he divided each instrument into different categories: membrane, wood, and metal. His idea was to have “sound extremes through the use of high-tensioned bongos and a low-tensioned bass drum”.⁹ The “instrumentation takes precedence. Solving the problems of tempo phrasing requires at the very least having something to play.”¹⁰ Within these categories, each instrument was divided by register: low, medium or high.¹¹ The figure below shows the key given for the piece by Xenakis himself.

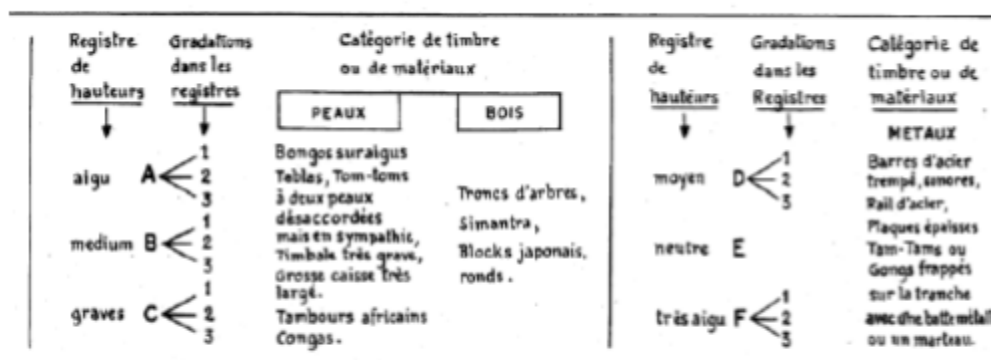


Fig. 2 depicts the key of instruments given in the score of *Psappha*

In his original sketches, as seen in the key, Xenakis wrote the following for each instrument groups:

Group A to consist of bongos. However, for its premiere, Sylvio Gualda used two bongos and a woodblock for the highest sound.¹²

⁹ Tom De Cock and Simon Florin, “A Historical View of Iannis Xenakis’s *Psappha*” *Percussive Notes*, 55, no 2 (May 2017): 46-48.

¹⁰ Steven Schick, *The Percussionist’s Art: Same Bed, Different Dreams*. Rochester, NY:University of Rochester Press, 2006, 194.

¹¹ Smith, 69.

¹² De Cock, 46.

Group B to consist of congas which Gualda replaced with toms.¹³

Group C to consist of one 40-inch concert bass drum with bass drum pedal for line C3 and large to medium toms for C1 and C2.¹⁴

Group D E F: different metal sounds. Gualda used four metal pipes for groups D and E and scraps of metal for Group F.¹⁵

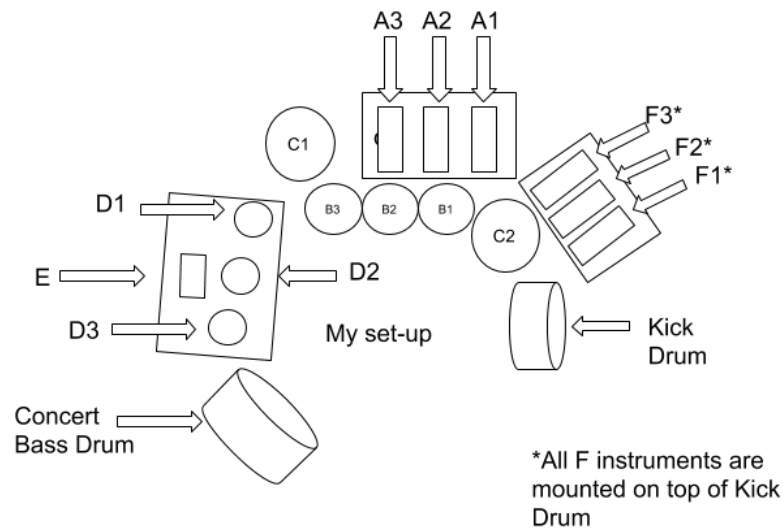
Multiple percussion repertoire requires patience when it comes to configuring a set-up. I tried many different drums, woodblocks, and metal pipes before I came to the perfect amalgamation of instruments that were in the right place. My set-up features bongos in group B rather than the traditional congas.¹⁶ I found congas were too tall for me and so I opted to go with bongos. This deviates from Gualda who used congas for group B. Most performers use some type of wood planks made of purpleheart wood for Group A. I used blocks of oak because they were more accessible to me in my area. I use both a kick drum and large concert bass drum for C3. I found the resonance of the big drum to be very appealing and satisfying during the long silences in section H. Instead of metal pipes for group D, I used cast iron skillet. However, I did use pipes for group F. For the only instrument in group E, I have used a metal plate I found at the hardware store. Below is a diagram of my set-up. I keep everything in front of me except the concert bass drum, which is behind me. I found this set-up to be the most compact and efficient. Everything I need is within arms reach. This allows me to focus my energy on dynamics and tempo rather than wasting energy on a big, spread out set-up.

¹³ De Cock, 47.

¹⁴ De Cock, 47.

¹⁵ De Cock, 47.

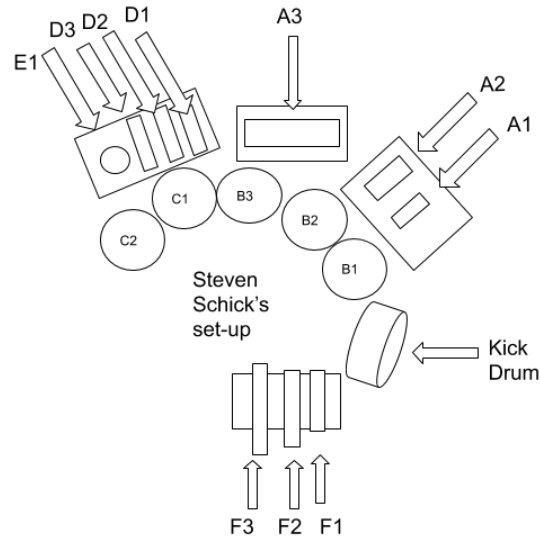
¹⁶ Rockwell, 21.



Percussion legend, Steven Schick helped make multiple percussion famous and a necessary part of the percussion repertoire. His performance of *Psappha* is standard study for any serious percussionist.¹⁷ Schick employs the standard wood sounds for group A, however, he uses two wood blocks and a plank of purpleheart wood for A3.¹⁸ Unlike my set-up, Schick uses a single kick drum for C3 rather than a concert bass drum and kick drum. He also uses metal pipes for group D and metal slats for group F which he places behind him.

¹⁷Schick, *The Percussionist's Art: Same Bed, Different Dreams*, 4.

¹⁸Every instrument referenced in this section comes from this performance by Schick. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yge7GNI5p_k



While Xenakis did not write “normal” music, *Psappha* still has a melody just like every other piece of music ever written. *Psappha* features a repeated, rising melodic line that goes through many transformations throughout the piece.

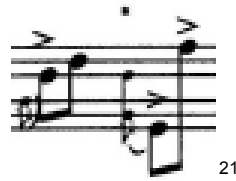
The presentation of rising melody happens in the very first section of the piece. It is very subtle as it appears as just two ascending notes but quickly develops into a three note melody during section b. Notice the leap in the melody that is filled in by the grace note. The grace note can be played either before or after the primary note.¹⁹ If played this way, this is the first appearance of an unbroken rising melody. However, if played before the primary note, the unbroken rising melody does not appear until section b.



¹⁹ Rockwell, 66.

²⁰ Rockwell, 66.

Xenakis hints at the rising melody, again, in section a before it is obviously stated in section b. He breaks up the melody by adding a note before the ascent reaches the top note. This is still the same melodic figure because the inserted note can be seen as more of a passing tone even though it is accented. It is a passing tone here because it is not in the same instrument group as the rest of the rising sequence. The top line mimics the final ascending group on the excerpt from section b with the accents on the first and the last instrument in the group.



The three note rising melody is first found, in an unbroken motion, in exercise b on instrument group B. The upward moving notes are repeated five times around measure 130. During this sequence, accents move throughout the melody (see below). Xenakis also harmonizes the ascent with the note either above or below.



Section d features the rising melody numerous times as the music slowly gets louder throughout the passage. Here, Xenakis moves the accent pattern around within the rising figure. He starts by accenting the first note figure which emphasizes it as the melody during this section (first example below). To make it more obvious that this is the melody, the final eighth notes are the rising figure with all of the notes accented (second figure below). This is the only time it happens in this passage.

²¹ Rockwell, 66.

²² Rockwell, 67.



The next and most important variation of the melody happens in section f. Up until now, the rising melody has stayed in the same instrument group. For example, if the rising figure started in group A, it stayed there. Now, the melody moves across instrument groups. In the excerpt below, the pattern starts in group B and moves to group A. Even though the melody has been transformed during section f, it is still presented in its first form-- three notes that rise in the same instrument group.



Later on, in section n, Xenakis elongates this melody through a series of repeated eighth notes. This is the last change the melody goes through as it is seen in section p in the same way as its original form in section d.

Preparing *Psappha* by Iannis Xenakis requires months of planning as well as hours of practice. Xenakis gives the performer many choices. By studying the piece and performances by great performers like Steven Schick and Sylvio Gualda, a performer can make educated decisions about instrumentation and set-up that are as unique as the performer. Xenakis makes the piece more than

²³ Rockwell, 68.

²⁴ Rockwell, 68.

²⁵ Rockwell, 71.

just repeated sounds on unfamiliar objects by stating and transforming a simple three-note melody throughout the piece.