IANNIS XENAKIS, MISTS

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Mists, the new work for piano solo by Iannis Xenakis, was given its first performance by Roger Woodward, its dedicatee, at the Queen's Hall in Edinburgh on April 16, 1981.

Whatever calculations may have gone into its making, nothing will dispel the impression of traditional polyphonic writing in what (for lack of a better word) I will call its 'exposition', and the listener's approach cannot help but be conditioned by that impression. The writing immediately brings to mind Bach's Goldberg Variations but the pianistic challenge is new, since what was played on the two keyboards of a harpsichord in Bach's time has here to be fitted on to the single keyboard of a piano, without sacrificing the wide sweep of the lines. Xenakis has succeeded in this compositional feat, but those waves of notes, so tellingly drawn on paper, are daunting when it comes to translating the visual image into the musical reality.

From the technical point of view there is also the problem of the almost unperformable complexity arising from the rigorously strict imitation of pitches, linked with a diversified treatment of time. The initial statement of the subject – theme – row is followed at a short distance by the canonic entry of another voice, slightly out of phase with the first one; by systematically carrying this process further, Xenakis builds up a four-voice canon in which 16 notes in one voice are set against 14 in another, 15 in a third, and 17 in a fourth. These are all (to borrow Xenakis's description) 'arborescences', that

is 'bushes of melodic lines, that undergo various rotations in the pitch – time space'. Since they all stem from the same root their form is identical, but the rotations result in these phase dislocations that are so puzzling to the ear and so demanding on the hand.

Mists is neatly divided into three sections; the second one starts at bar 40 of the piece and exactly matches the first for length but displays a completely different character, much more Xenakis-like in its visual aspect. The idea underlying this section is 'the exploitation of non-octavating pitch-sieves (scales) and their cyclic transpositions . . . Their sonic exploitations are made either melodically or by means of stochastic distribution . . . in order to produce soundclouds of defined density.' Through a detailed system of pedalling and dynamics these sound-agglomerations of varying density, which are separated by long silences, take, in turn, the aspects of haze, mists, and clouds, creating a unique sound-world, magic and disturbing, in which certain gestures, such as quickly repeated single notes, function in a way like signposts.

In the third section the two ideas, the linear and the pointillist, combine in what, traditionally speaking, one would call a recapitulation. It takes the form of a close competition between the two principles, which, though both familiar from other works by Xenakis, are shaped here in a new and exciting way. After a final flourishing of arborescences, very close and very lucidly exposed since the pedal has been withdrawn, the piece, gathering passion and urgency, draws to what Woodward calls its 'tragic end'.

In the course of the concert, given by The New Music Group of Scotland and conducted by Edward Harper, the two performances of the new work were separated by György Ligeti's lovable Ten Pieces for wind quintet (1968) and Edgard Varèse's truly prophetic *Octandre* (1923). The memorable evening ended with an impressive performance of *Eonta* (1963-4, for two trumpets, three trombones, and piano) by Xenakis, a work of formidable stature that will never cease to surprise, subdue, and cast its spell. For the Scottish audience it was a first performance, and they responded with spontaneous applause.