

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Constructing Both Music And Musical Language

By BERNARD HOLLAND

A remarkable new community of composers appeared after World War II. It was a little like an orphanage, for here were men and women forcibly severed from their past yet trying to find some altered connection with it. Tradition lay in ruins along with Europe itself. Before, methods of making music had been passed on from one generation to the next and undergone change in the process. Now, for many, the transactions of inheritance had been interrupted if not destroyed.

Composers like Iannis Xenakis suddenly had two jobs. While Mozart and Brahms wrote in languages received from immediate ancestors, a member of the postwar school became creator and philologist in one. Think of Shakespeare in this double role: inventing not only the plays but the grammar to couch them in.

Mr. Xenakis, who will be 74 next month, made the trip from his home in France last week and has been in New York for two concerts of his music. The first on Sunday offered chamber music at the 92d Street Y played by the ST-X Ensemble Xenakis USA under Charles Bornstein. The second was at Carnegie Hall on Tuesday: an orchestral retrospective played by the Carnegie Mellon Philharmonic and conducted by Juan Pablo Izquierdo.

Mr. Xenakis has always made it clear that his music is to be accepted on its own expressive terms, yet every performance seems inextricably attached to explanations of how it was written. Never for a moment at any Xenakis event are we allowed to forget the composer's background in architecture, civil engineering and mathematics, and how probability calculus, Markovian chains and Boolean algebra are his sometime models.

It is music easy to mistrust. We are used to the composer's heart as freestanding, needing not explanation but only sensuous and spiritual response. Mr. Xenakis and his colleagues tell us otherwise: that music today thinks as much as it feels; that it is observed as much as it is sensed; and that its sounds can quite

Iannis Xenakis visits New York for two concerts of his music.

legitimately represent a world reconfigured in Pythagorean numbers, as if all those teeming chord textures were colored illustrations for a novel.

Rejecting recent musical history, Mr. Xenakis sought connections with much earlier Greek ideas of musical proportion. It was a congenial world for him, one where science and music, rationality and intuition, seemed easy partners. A conscious homage to this deep past came on Tuesday in "La Déesse Athéna." A chantlike narrative from Aeschylus, it featured Timothy Adams's busy percussion playing and Philip Larson's harrowing vocal leaps between a natural baritone and falsetto.

I don't think many of us hear Mr. Xenakis's numbers and am confident he doesn't want us to. If their effect is subliminal, so be it. In any case, of the week's 10 pieces, 2 — "Evryali" on Sunday and "Persephassa" on Tuesday — were powerfully affecting. Two further pieces for orchestra ("Metastasis" and "Pithoprakta") seemed no longer quite so fresh as they had 40 years ago. A lot of the other music was often more interesting to think about than actually to hear.

"Evryali," a piano piece rescored by Mr. Bornstein for 16 players, was richly fascinating, filled with bright, tiny fragments of color bouncing around in a fixed space. Here the parallel of architecture is apt: listeners are not travelers but witnesses; music is not a journey but a place. "Persephassa" is for six percussionists spaced ideally in the round but on Tuesday set in a semicircle onstage. It is rapturous exercise in sonic force. The stretches of fixed movement overlaid with tiny rhythmic anomalies gave this music true substance. The newer and more caustic "Dämmerschein" seemed bereft in comparison.



Ozler Muhammad/The New York Times

Juan Pablo Izquierdo conducting the Carnegie Mellon Philharmonic.

"Metastasis" helped make Mr. Xenakis famous. It moves in huge orchestral chords, virtually every musician playing a different part. Its "stochastic" methodology, born of probability and statistical theories, has been likened to a school of fish, each participant going its own way but the school itself maintaining a specific shape.

Forty years ago this music woke a lot of listeners up; today it seems more pleasantly entertaining than

disturbing. The method once intrigued us; maybe we know the method too well.

Carnegie Mellon's young players labored admirably under their energetic conductor. On Sunday, Mr. Bornstein and his players seemed uneasy with the easier pieces but more coherent in the difficult ones. His soloists were Michael Lowenstern, bass clarinetist; Catherine Aks, soprano; and April Lindevald, mezzo-soprano.