

The acoustic emotions of Iannis Xenakis, translated by the scenic visions of Yannis Kokkos into a Mediterranean *Oresteia*

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Among the performance experiences to be ‘discovered’ in the Mediterranean, one of the most original is indubitably that of the *Orestyadi* in Gibellina.²⁷

The *Orestyadi*, a product of the Foundation of the same name, are a group of theatrical productions which, since 1982, have benefited from the participation of hundreds of internationally celebrated artists at the Teatro dei Ruderer, built on the ruins of a small Sicilian town that was destroyed in the 1968 earthquake, with the aim of utilizing the theater as a vehicle for the cultural reconstruction of what has been lost.

What unites the great number of theatrical productions that have been staged in this unique venue in the heart of the Mediterranean is the idea that, thanks to these performances, the ruins of Gibellina would come to represent those of our forgotten past,²⁸ and that in this town, utterly destroyed and erased by a natural cataclysm, theater would be restored to its fundamental civic purpose,²⁹ through the recovery of myth and its memory: reciting on the ruins would breathe new life into them.³⁰

These are the principles that underlie the rich and diverse programs of the theatrical seasons of the *Orestyadi* at the Teatro dei Ruderer, which have featured, among numerous other works, a large number of classical tragedies, produced, co-produced or simply hosted by the Foundation.³¹

²⁷ This essay is an excerpt from the volume by Valentina Garavaglia, entitled *L'effimero e l'eterno. L'esperienza teatrale di Gibellina*, Rome, Bulzoni, 2012.

²⁸ Melo Freni, *Alle origini di Ciaveddu*, in *Ciaveddu, atto unico di Salvatore Fiume*, Siracusa, Ediprint, 1985, p. 13.

²⁹ Emilia Costantini, *Gibellina sulle macerie rivive il teatro*, in “Corriere della sera”, 17 July 1986.

³⁰ Carmelo Alberti, *Le ragioni del mito*, in “Sipario”, n. 462, November-December 1986, p. 58.

³¹ Specifically, the classical dramas presented in Gibellina number fourteen: *Agamènnuni* by Emilio Isgrò, directed by Filippo Crivelli, 1983; *I Cuèfuri* by Emilio Isgrò, directed by Filippo Crivelli, 1984; *Villa Eumenidi*, by Emilio Isgrò, directed by Filippo Crivelli, 1985; *Oresteia* (after Aeschylus), directed by Yannis Kokkos, 1987; *Électre ou la chute des masques* by Marguerite Yourcenar, directed by Luca Coppola, 1990; *The Trojan Women* (after Euripides), directed by Thierry Salmon, 1988; *The Atrides: Iphigenia* (Euripides), *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* (Aeschylus) directed by Ariane Mnouchkine, 1991; *Antigone* (Sophocles), directed by Alexandru Tocilescu, 1993; *Oresteia* (Aeschylus) directed by Peter Stein, 1995; *Phaedra* (Euripides and Seneca), directed by Silviu Purcarete, 1995; *Il decimo anno*, from *the Trojan Women* (Euripides) and *Agamemnon* (Aeschylus), 2000, directed by Andrea De Rosa and Francesco Saponaro; *Agamemnon*, (Aeschylus), directed by Rodrigo Garcia, 2003; *The Libation Bearers*, (Aeschylus), translated by Pier Paolo Paolini, directed

In this sense, at least in the first fifteen years of its existence, the festival has followed the general trend of the last three decades of the twentieth century in Europe, in which theater manifested a renewed interest in the form of classical tragedy, which, due to the variety of subjects it addresses, reflects a wide spectrum of human experience, centering on the 'great' issues revolving around the concept of life and death and man's eternal existential questions.

Many contemporary directors have found the symbolism and mythical distance typical of tragedy a useful instrument for interpreting the conflicts of a chaotic and "liquid"³² present, rediscovering in tragic theater the celebration of a rite that is 'necessary' to recapture what has been lost.³³

Most of the representations of classical tragedies staged in Gibellina have revolved around the themes of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*,³⁴ seen from different perspectives. From the start, the figure of Orestes has shown itself to be central to the Gibellina identity, first and foremost because of the protagonist's rebellion against the established order. In fact,

by Monica Conti, 2004; *Eumenides*, (Aeschylus), translated by Pier Paolo Pasolini, directed by Vincenzo Pirrotta, 2004.

³² The term "liquid society", which defines our contemporary reality, was coined by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman to indicate the feeling of permanent precariousness and uncertainty that today's society forces upon its members. (See Zygmunt Bauman, *Vita liquida*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2005)

³³ Freddy Decrus, *Le bruit court que nus n'en avons pas fini avec les Grecs*, Georges Banu (ed. by), *Tragédie grecque. Défi de la scène contemporaine*, in "Études théâtrales", n. 21 Louvain-La Neuve, Centre d'Études théâtrales, 2001, pp. 13-28.

³⁴ Aeschylus' trilogy, the only ancient dramatic trilogy to survive in its entirety, was written in 458 B.C. and is comprised of *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides*. In *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra recounts how she murdered her husband Agamemnon with an ax, as well as Cassandra, Priam's daughter, brought back by Agamemnon to Mycenae as war booty: "So that he could not escape his fate, so that he could not flee, in a net without a hole, as in a fisherman's net I wrapped him. Oh, what a beautiful death mantle! Twice I strike him; twice he screams; and his limbs fall down. And on him a third blow I land, in homage to Zeus, savior of the dead", (*Agamemnon*, episode V, in Carlo Diano (ed. by), *Il teatro greco: tutte le tragedie*, Florence, Sansoni, 1970, p. 132). In *The Libation Bearers*, the shortest of the three tragedies in the trilogy, Aegisthos usurps Agamemnon's throne, and Orestes, together with his friend Pylades, takes revenge by entering in the palace disguised as a merchant and killing both Aegisthos and Clytemnestra: "Behold this couple, the twin tyrants of my land, my father's murderers, the looters of my house. Regal they were, seated on the throne; but lovers even here they be now; their fate shows it, and their vows shall remain linked forever to this proof of loyalty. Together they vowed the death of my father, unhappy man! And they swore they would die together, and these vows they have kept. [...] Oh, nothing can I say of the death of Aegisthos: he was punished for his adultery, as prescribed by law. But she who against her husband committed a horror such as this, against the man whose children she bore in her womb – a burden of love then, and now, as you can see, of woe and hate... What do you say of this? I say that if she had been born a moray or a viper, if only she had touched someone, not even bitten him, she would have turned him into a putrid cadaver with the fury of her misbegotten nature.", (*The Libation Bearers*, Esodo, in Carlo Diano (ed. by), *Il teatro greco: tutte le tragedie*, op. cit., p. 154). In the *Eumenides*, the gods are the primary actors. The Erinyes persecute the matricide, Orestes, but divine intervention resolves the problem when Athena intercedes, absolving Orestes: "On this hill Reverence and Fear, her sister-in-law, will impede the citizenry from offending Justice, unless they themselves desire to subvert the law: those who muddy the limpid drinking waters will themselves find nothing to drink. Neither anarchy nor despotism: this is the rule that I advise all the citizens who love their country to observe", (*Eumenides*, III episode, in Carlo Diano (ed. by), *Il teatro greco: tutte le tragedie*, op. cit., p. 168).

[...] from Aeschylus' profoundly religious standpoint, the divine structures the cosmos and man; fate weighs on man's shoulders like a gentle yoke, worthy of veneration, but is also a source of fear and a sense of impotence, of moments of improper action and of folly, as well as doubt. [...] In the *Oresteia* this is represented by the contrasting norms: familial piety and piety towards the gods on one hand, personal ambition and rights of rank on the other; on one hand the law of visceral maternal love and on the other the law governing matrimonial union, guaranteed by the civil authorities; on one side, the sanguinary law of vengeance, and on the other a rational law based on reasoning and the dialectics of the city tribunals.³⁵

Orestes founds a new order, without the will of the gods and governed by the will of men: he lives in the hope of building a new society that will break with the old order. As in every tragedy, even Aeschylus' *Oresteia* therefore presents a mythical world, but "the myths have a historic time and a meta-historic time; a time in which they originated and a universal validity that transcends time. They make sense even transposed from one language to another, from one culture to another, from one religion to another"³⁶ unlike epics, in which, however, the figure of Orestes appears,³⁷ but

[...] epic and lyric have only one time frame: the past. They are a story narrated, of events that have already occurred. Tragedy begins with the division of the *Oresteia* in two times: that which has been and that which is: Orestes arrives in Mycenae at dawn and kills Clytemnestra and Aegisthos at sunset of the same day. The roulette wheel never stops spinning: it has a past, a present and a future. The tragedy is in the present tense. All dramatic works exist in the present, but tragedy also recalls the past and presages the future. It is a present that lies between a defined past and a defined future.³⁸

³⁵ Annamaria Cascetta, *La tragedia inattuale, Un'ipotesi di ricerca*, in "Comunicazioni sociali", anno VIII, n. 1-2 January-June, Milan, Vita e Pensiero, 1986, pp. 14-15 and 17. Also Bruno Snell, concerning the actions performed by Aeschylus' characters, notes that to them "acting does not merely consist of reacting to a pre-existing fact, but of setting a point of support for the future. Decision, rights, fate, all these concepts so important for Aeschylus (and for tragedy in general) are perceived by man in their most precise and clearest form at the moment of action. Because one is responsible only for one's actions. [...] Thus, man left strictly to himself and his own means finds in Aeschylus a solid support in justice, but we already feel him burdened by a weight that might be too much for him: the ground might shift beneath his feet. The gods speak from increasingly remote distances; man begins to reflect critically on the divine and relies more on his own resources, but this leaves him more and more alone", Bruno Snell, *La cultura greca e le origini del pensiero europeo*, Turin, Einaudi, 1963, pp. 160 and 192.

³⁶ Jan Kott, *Divorare gli dei. Un'interpretazione della tragedia classica*, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2005, p. 280.

³⁷ Orestes appears in the III book of Homer's *Odyssey*; vv. 395-399.

³⁸ Jan Kott, *Divorare gli dei. Un'interpretazione della tragedia classica*, op. cit., p. 285.

Apart from the decision to stage the *Oresteia* in Gibellina because the town is located in the territory of the Elimi, who were, according to legend, descended from the inhabitants of the city of Troy, there is another motive that justifies the coupling of *Oresteia*-Gibellina, which is summarized by Dominique Fernandes with reference to the *Oresteia* directed by Yannis Kokkos in 1987, which is the subject of this paper:

[the *Oresteia*] is the perfect incarnation of the *Sicilian identity*. I found numerous references, doubtless involuntary, to episodes in Sicilian history and culture. Were these intentional on the part of the authors? Taking vengeance independently rather than seeking justice in the courts is an old custom on the island: the Mafia draws its strength and power in part from a lack of faith in the government's institutions. Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia, the price demanded by the gods in exchange for victory against the Trojans. Clytemnestra murders her husband in revenge for the killing of her daughter. Orestes kills his mother to take vengeance for the murder of his father. And the chain of violence would have continued but for the intervention of Athena. In Sicily, feuds between Mafia clans are transmitted from one generation to the next. And Athena's intercession is awaited in vain. The *Oresteia* and its happy ending offered the inhabitants of Gibellina and the surrounding area, who flocked to the three performances in great numbers, a reflection of their struggles against the Mafia, as well as a model, not so utopian for them, of a society in which the order of public justice follows the chaos of private vengeance, in which the Eumenides, paladins of peace and reason, defeat and banish the devastating Erinyes.³⁹

The Foundation's decision to focus on the work of Aeschylus can thus be seen from a fully twentieth century standpoint, which attributes unquestioning validity to the ideas "of the individual, personal freedom and the shifting of the ethical basis to the centrality of the will, rather than of knowledge [which] sharply distinguish its background from that of archaic, ancient Greece".⁴⁰

These ideas also shape a new concept of limits, which, in a contemporary key, can be summed up as follows:

³⁹ Dominique Fernandes, *Le radeau de la Gorgone, promenades en Sicile*, Paris, Grasset, 1988, pp. 371-372. The term *sicilitudine* [TN: Sicilian identity] was coined in 1970 in *La corda pazza. Scrittori e cose della Sicilia* (Bompiani, 2004) by Leonardo Sciascia, with whom Dominique Fernandes was friendly and with whom he co-authored *Les Siciliens. Ferdinando Scianna* (Paris, Denoël, 1977). *Sicilitudine* indicates a gestalt of psychological and existential traits typical of Sicilians: resulting from specific historical events and the island's singular institutional structure, they have endured through the centuries and provide the possibility of establishing a 'magical' correspondence between current-day Sicily and an eternal Sicily. Among the elements that compose "Sicilitudine", according to Sciascia, uncertainty and insecurity is the most central throughout Sicilian history: the island has always been vulnerable, and historical fears have become existential ones, that lead to a tendency to isolation, to the distancing of individuals, groups, communities from each other and of the region itself from the rest of the country.

⁴⁰ Annamaria Cascetta (ed. by), *La tragedia nel teatro del Novecento*, Bari, Laterza, 2009, p. 13.

[...] it is the limitation of man, the *hic et nunc* viewpoint of his *situation*, so aptly described by twentieth century philosophers, the insufficiency of his resources in comparison to the physical forces of nature and the animal instincts. It is the biological limit, whose most potent manifestation is mortal illness and death. It is the moral limit, i.e. evil, expressed as violence, aggression, mistreatment by others, and of others, and of the individual towards himself. It is the limit of a man towards other men, the fruit of a culture of repression and exploitation. It is the limit man finds in attempting to establish rational relations, the interruption of relations with everything, with the other, with the beyond, the mortification of the re-ligious man.⁴¹

But:

[...] the Mycenaean murder is not merely a family affair: the victim is a king, a sovereign. Consequently, it is not merely a violation of family bonds, but involves the usurpation of a throne. In the tragedy, the situations reflect both moral and political conflicts, political in the literal sense of the Greek *polis*, the city-state. [...] Crimes committed at the level of the throne are not just violations of the moral code, but a catastrophe for the State.⁴²

Among the many representations staged here, the one that most closely addresses the topic in question, *The sensorial Theatre – Visual and acoustic emotions as a way of feeling Opera*, is indubitably the *Oresteia* of Iannis Xenakis, directed by Yannis Kokkos.

Iannis Xenakis,⁴³ one of the most prominent composers of the post-war period, transposed Aeschylus' trilogy into music for the first time in 1966⁴⁴ and

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² Jan Kott, *Divorare gli dei. Un'interpretazione della tragedia classica*, cit., pp. 296-297.

⁴³ Iannis Xenakis (Brăila, Romania, 1922 – Paris, 2001), was a composer, architect and engineer, a naturalized French citizen. At the age of ten he moved to Greece, and studied in Athens until 1941, when the country was invaded by the Nazis. He emigrated to France in 1947 and began working with Le Corbusier, designing large-scale projects like the residential housing complexes in Nantes and Briey-en-Forêt, the cultural center in Baghdad and the convent at La Tourette, in addition to the Philips pavilion at the Brussels world fair. While in Paris, he begins to study music at the Conservatoire Supérieure, applying mathematical and architectural concepts to composing. In 1955 he composes his first work, *Metastaseis*, which was directed by Hans Rosbaud at the Donaueschingen Festival. In the sixties he began writing music for the theater, first for Aeschylus' *The Suppliants* (1964), then for his *Oresteia* (1965-1966) and Seneca's *Meda* (1967). A pioneer in the use of computers for logarithmic composition, in 1966 he founded the *Centre d'Études de Mathématique et Automatique Musicales*, dedicated to research in the application of computer algorithms to music. He composed a considerable number of works, from pieces for solo instruments to chamber music, from string quartets to orchestral works, from choir pieces to compositions for magnetic tape, and he stimulated much interest from biographers and music critics, among which we indicate: Enzo Restagno (ed. by), *Xenakis*, Turin, EDT, 1988.

⁴⁴ The work was commissioned to Xenakis by Ypsilanti (Michigan), which takes its name from Demetrius Ypsilanti, a hero of Greek independence, who fought against the Ottomans in 1825, in defense of the city of Argo. It made its debut at Eastern Michigan University's Briggs baseball stadium. In the initial version, in both English and Greek, Xenaxis wrote one hundred minutes of

reprised it in 1987 for the debut performances at the Teatro dei Rudereri in Gibellina, with sets and sculptures by Francis Poirier,⁴⁵ music arrangements by Michel Tabachnik and Dominique Debart and stage direction by Yannis Kokkos.⁴⁶

The *Oresteids*, in their fifth year on the program, continue to offer re-elaborations of the myth and of its connection with Sicily, but on this occasion they

[...] raise the bar [...] and for the first time, stage a full-blown opera. [...] A French *Oresteia*, in terms of the place where the two main authors live and work and where it was originally produced; a Sicilian *Oresteia* in terms of the wholesale participation of the population and the children of Gibellina in the production and the natural setting of this grand project, which involved almost total choral participation, with almost 500 performers on stage. [...] And thus the return of the *Oresteia*, in addition to re-establishing, on the ruins of the old town, a ceremonial of collective memory – a link with history and a metaphorical representation of the past – through its association with the Sicilian *Oresteia* that turned a cemetery into a theater, becomes a memory within a memory.⁴⁷

Xenakis' opera is complex, and requires a concise explanation to make Kokkos' staging comprehensible. Xenakis' *Oresteia* has diverse musical influences, taken from different cultures and epochs: Greek tragedy, Japanese Noh Theater, Byzantine music and the warm, textured sound of its composer, a result of his research, begun in the sixties and summed up in the introduction to his essay entitled *Musiques Formelles*:

[...] this text represents a collection of studies on composition that explored different aspects. The effort to reduce certain sonorous sensations, to understand their logical causes, to master them and to utilize them for purposeful constructions; the attempt to concretize flights of fancy through sound, to test them within the compositions; the desire to better understand past works, attempting to identify a more profound unifying principle that corresponds to the scientific thought of our times; the attempt to produce art

music for the three movements, *Agamemnon, The Suppliants and The Eumenides*. Subsequently, he re-wrote the text phonetically in Greek, and after a series of cuts, reduced the duration of the work to just over forty minutes and titled it *Suite de l'Orestie*. The shortened version was performed at the Sigma 3 Festival in Bordeaux in November 1967. In 1978 the *Oresteia* was performed in Mycenae and, in 1987, on the occasion of the staging of the *Orestidi di Gibellina*, Xenakis again re-wrote the *Suite*. (See Pedro Bittencourt, *Une lecture de L'Oresteia di Xenakis*, p. 2 in: www.pedrobittencourt.info/media/OresteiaXenakisPedroBITTENCOURT.pdf).

⁴⁵ Francis Poirier, is an internationally renowned sculptor and set designer. His works for theater and the cinema are both numerous and highly regarded.

⁴⁶ Yannis Kokkos (Athens, 1944), is an artist of international renown. He worked extensively and notably as a set designer and costume designer and, beginning in 1987, as a director of prose theater and opera. Kokkos' sets stand out for their magical realism, including natural settings and evocative spaces. (See Georges Banu (**ouvrage conçu et réalisé par**), *Yannis Kokkos, le scénographe et le heron*, Arles, Actes sud, 2004 (1989).

⁴⁷ Franco Quadri, *La memoria della memoria*, in "Labirinti", year III, single issue, 1990, p. 87.

through a “geometric process”, meaning to provide a less uncertain logical foundation than momentary impulse, and at the same time more serious, more worthy of the proud struggle that human cognition carries out in every other field. All of these efforts must lead to a sort of abstraction and formalization of musical composition.⁴⁸

In line with Aeschylus’ tragedy, the language spoken is ancient Greek, and the many homicides are rendered with sobriety. The intention of Xenakis, who composed the first version in 1966, which is among the first experiments in the adaptation of a text to music, is to link Aeschylus’ poetics to the music of the future. At the center stands man, viewed in terms of a problem. It is a question of

[...] taking the remains or the ruins of a text and trying to give them, as freely as possible, a meaning that corresponds to our times [...]. This is what I attempted in the music for the *Oresteia*, but even afterwards I continued to study ways to better approach the problem, mostly by using phonetics. I studied ancient phonetics, from the Attica period, and all the musicological contributions I could find.⁴⁹

In the Gibellina version of 1987, Xenakis adds new parts: an electronic prelude and the movement for Cassandra, based on the rhythm of the ancient text, on prosody, which was sung on that occasion by the baritone soloist Spyros Sakkas,⁵⁰ whose falsetto register reaches almost to the range of a soprano, and by the percussionist Silvio Gualda, accompanied by a twenty string psalter.

Kassandra can be performed and analyzed independently of the rest of the *Oresteia* and can easily engender comparisons to traditional music heard in Japanese theater, whose instrumentation is often simple and linear, and accompanies vigorous, stylized vocals, with fluctuating volume – sometimes without regard to a specifically musical notation – conjugating the spoken text with the melodic background. Similarly, in *Kassandra* we also find this tendency towards a flat, unsophisticated instrumentation. In addition, the use of the psalter and the sonorous turns are as hypnotic as a reflection.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Iannis Xenakis, *Musiques formelles*, in “Revue Musicale”, n. 253-254, 1963, p. 9.

⁴⁹ Enzo Restagno (ed. by), *Xenakis*, op. cit., p. 39.

⁵⁰ “The singer’s ability to reach very high notes in falsetto gives the impression of a mythological being, halfway between human and the indescribable, which in this case can well be a priestess or a goddess”, Evaggelia Vagopoulou, *L’Universalità dell’Oresteia di Xenakis*, excerpted from the International Symposium on Iannis Xenakis. Athens, May 2005, p. 250-257, in: www.apuntozeta.name/CD/slides/Oresteia.html. In his review of the performance, Paolo Petroni writes of the baritone: “A primal moment of great impact, almost of barbaric possession, that a stringed instrument, similar to a zither, underscores, bringing a different and unusual coloratura to the score”, Paolo Petroni, *Sui ruderi della vecchia Gibellina risuona forte il canto di Eschilo*, in “Corriere della Sera”, 23 August 1987.

⁵¹ Evaggelia Vagopoulou, *L’Universalità dell’Oresteia di Xenakis*, op. cit.

The Cassandra⁵² piece is inserted by Xenakis in the first movement of *Agamemnon*, followed by the choral movement of *The Libation Bearers* and the final movement of *The Eumenides*, which in 1992 was split by the goddess Athena's monologue, when Xenakis once again modified the work. The Gibellina staging underscores the convergence of the ancient and the new, and is performed among the ruins of the old town.

Xenakis' music is as important to the substance of the performance as the spoken word: it is an integral component of the dramatic content, and an essential vehicle of the projection of the action. Even more, because its message is not limited by the words, only the music can give the tragedy its essential violence, its depth and its archetypal power. Its voluntary nakedness, its intensity, freshness and archaic roughness, emphasize its kinship with Noh theater. And, in fact, it seems that it was Noh theater that inspired, stimulated, perhaps even guided Xenakis. "Japanese theater", he noted, "should serve as a locus of meditation for the framework of modern or classic theater [... because] its every element – the poetics, the treatment of the voice, the action, the dance, the music, the colors and their respective symbolisms – are blended chemically, inseparably and ingeniously."⁵³

After all, as Xenakis says, with respect to the archaic reconstruction of proto-Greek theater,

Aeschylus lived in Classical Greece, but the myths he dramatizes hark back to Mycenaean times, so they have much more ancient roots. Another era is clearly visible, not just in the myths, the language and the relations with the divinities, and it would be interesting to know how those archaic aspects were presented in his performances, but we know nothing about that.⁵⁴

This *Oresteia* also includes a prelude, *Mycènes Alpha*,⁵⁵ an electro-acoustic musical piece composed using the UPIC⁵⁶ system, which introduces the mysterious

⁵² Evaggelia Vagopoulou, notes that "The Cassandra scene is particularly accentuated in Aeschylus' drama, her long monologue marks a crucial turn in the tragedy's plot. [...] In the scene, the young priestess and prophet is already in Greece, a captive of King Agamemnon, who has taken her for his concubine. In vain, she tries to explain to the men of Argos (the chorus) that she and Agamemnon will soon be murdered by Clytemnestra, his legitimate wife, who seeks vengeance for Agamemnon's prolonged absence and infidelity. But the curse upon Cassandra makes her prophecy fall on deaf ears, and the men of Argos are incredulous, so that the occurrence of the tragic events becomes inevitable," Evaggelia Vagopoulou, *L'Universalità dell'Oresteia di Xenakis*, excerpted from the International Symposium on *Iannis Xenakis*, op. cit.

⁵³ Maurice Flauret, *Il teatro di Xenakis*, in Enzo Restagno (ed. by) *Xenakis*, op. cit., p.163.

⁵⁴ Enzo Restagno (ed. by), *Xenakis*, op. cit., p. 33.

⁵⁵ *Mycènes Alpha* is a ten minute electronic composition for two-track magnetic tape, composed by the author in 1978.

⁵⁶ The UPIC system, invented by Xenakis in 1977, is a computer-assisted music composition software. UPIC stands for Poliagogic Information Unit of the CEMAMu (*Centre d'Etudes de Mathématique et Automatique Musicales*) of Paris. UPIC consists of a graphic module linked to a

period in which the myths originated. The combination of ancient and modern, performed in the unique setting of the ruins, underscores the composer's desire to project the *Oresteia* into the future:⁵⁷

[...] one of my fundamental notions was to infuse the music with the unique poetics of Aeschylus' tongue, and to include in a powerful acoustic concentrate an archaic mood that would simultaneously project the listener into the musical future.⁵⁸

In *Notice sur l'Orestie*, Xenakis expounds on Greek theater, treating it as a total experience, going beyond the visual and the auditory spheres to penetrate the realm of thought. Taking Hegel's view as his point of departure, which defines sensory experience as preceding the intellect, Xenakis overturns the Aristotelian idea that there is nothing in the intellect that is not based on sensory experience. This leads him to affirm that "the use of tetrachords and the extensive use of microtonalities in the *Oresteia* [...] represent an attempt to assimilate a musical lexicon typical of ancient, non-western origins."⁵⁹

In each of the three sections - *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, *The Eumenides* – the choral element predominates. There are three choruses, for a total of 280 people;⁶⁰ a men's chorus for *Agamemnon*, a women's chorus for *The*

computer, which produces waves and loudnesses that are then processed by the computer. There are two levels of composition: "the microcomposition, which involves the generation of timbres by creating waves that are then memorized by the computer in the form of *wavetables*. The forms of the waves can be those typical of electronic music (triangular, sine, etc.) or they can be of random forms, generated by the user. The simplicity of complexity of the waveforms has a clear impact on the timbre of the sound produced. In general, Xenakis has a predilection, which is evident in *Mycenae-Alpha*, for the more complex waveforms, rich in harmonics, which usually generate rather harsh timbres. The second level, macrocomposition, instead involves using the timbres generated in the microcompositional phase to trace graphic patterns within a temporal-frequency diagram. These are drawn by the user on a graphic board. A composition is usually composed of different patterns that define the sections of the piece, which Xenakis calls "pages". (See Andrea Arcella, *Il sistema UPC e Mycenae-Alpha di Iannis Xenakis*, in: www.scribd.com/doc/29863768/Andrea-Arcella-Essay-Mycene-Alpha). Also see: Enzo Restagno (ed. by), *Xenakis*, op. cit., pp. 57-58.

⁵⁷ In the same year, at the Festival Musica 87 in Strasburg, the piece, given the change in location, was not performed. Instead, in Strasburg the first recording of the opera was made, although a visual recording of the staging of the work in Gibellina is shown in the film *Le gesta di Gibellina*, directed by Hugo Santiago (1988). In his comment on the performance in Gibellina, Paolo Petroni wrote, with reference to the prelude: "... a flurry of locomotive whistles that develop into a siren, the roar of a motor, charging the atmosphere with a sudden anguish. A modernity full of conscious pathos, a way of reliving myth by blending the archaic with the eternal." Paolo Petroni, *Sui ruderi della vecchia Gibellina risuona forte il canto di Eschilo*, op. cit.

⁵⁸ Iannis Xenakis, *Notice sur l'Orestie*, program of Festival Sigma 3, in Bordeaux, 1967, archives of the Centre de Documentation de la musique Contemporaine (Cdmc), Paris. In 1976, the same essay appeared in a Greek edition entitled *Antiquity and contemporary music*, finally, it was included in the volume Makis Solomos (ed. by), *Iannis Xenakis, Keimena peri musive kai arkitektonikes*, Athens, Psychogios, 2001.

⁵⁹ Evaggelia Vagopoulou, *L'Universalità dell'Oresteia di Xenakis*, excerpted from the International Symposium on Iannis Xenakis, op. cit.

⁶⁰ The choruses are those of Anjou, Alsace and Lower Normandy, and the Palermo choir of sacred music, "V. Amato", to which is added the children's chorus of Gibellina in the finale of *The*

Libation Bearers, with three low register women's voices for Electra and three high men's voices for Orestes, and a children's chorus, which is introduced at the end of *The Eumenides* along with the women's and men's choruses.

The composer attempts to heighten the sense of drama through a dialogue between members of the chorus, thanks to an asynchronous distribution of the text (at first his intention was to propose an incomprehensible text), to the children's chorus, which very aptly depicts the transformation of the *Erynnēs* into the *Eumenides*, and to the conventional choral odes coupled with rapid interactions, resembling stichomythia. Tracts of austere primitivism, pagan sounds and linear monadic chromatics all represent sections of the original text; Xenakis also indicates the precise verses where the music must be solely instrumental.⁶¹

Agamemnon is the movement with the least spoken text in the entire trilogy. The tragic chords have a cutting, strident quality, which is at the same time solemn; on the contrary, *The Eumenides* is the movement with the most speech, especially in the opening and closing segments;⁶² in *The Libation Bearers*, percussion prevails, with the instruments partly located in the orchestra and partly in the men's chorus, close to the audience. The result

[...] is the fruit of a scientific spirit that has constructed a complex and multidisciplinary edifice: Xenakis' thoughts find their inspiration in both Greek antiquity and modern science, producing an original and heretofore unheard musical work. [...] The presence of much spoken text, few sung lyrics and numerous instrumental sequences (with an indication of the corresponding verses) prove that Xenakis has transposed the lexicon of Aeschylus [...] both instrumentally and in a powerful sonorous concentrate, through spoken and sung text and through the supposed phonetics of the fifth century B.C.. The archaic atmosphere is achieved both through the instruments (tragic chords) and the voices (the cry in the finale of *The Eumenides*, the sequence in simple recto-tono, the use of falsetto). [...] Xenakis was inspired by the complete integration of the arts in Noh Theater, and his *Oresteia* would be difficult to appreciate or perform without an appropriate staging.⁶³

Iannis Kokkos' direction interprets Xenakis' musical text in a dreamlike key. The ruined two-floor house, with the ruins of Gibellina on the hillside in the background, becomes the royal palace, topped by an enormous and ominous bull. It

Eumenides, a total of five different choruses.

⁶¹ Evaggelia Vagopoulou, *L'Universalità dell'Oresteia di Xenakis*, excerpted from the International Symposium on Iannis Xenakis, op. cit.

⁶² In *The Eumenides* as well there are percussions that testify to the influence of Japanese Noh theater on the work.

⁶³ Pedro Bittencourt, *Une lecture de L'Oresteia di Xenakis*, op. cit., pp. 10 and 11.

is here that

Clytemnestra, in a red robe, awaits the triumphant return of her husband, King Agamemnon, from Troy, planning to murder him and usurp his throne with her lover, Aegisthos. [...] The bonfires that, in Aeschylus' tale, announce the arrival of the royal procession and the proclamation of victory, have been scattered by Kokkos [...] on the hillside, lending a dreamlike atmosphere to the performance.⁶⁴

In fact, as we read in the director's notes:

The dark, ancient memories echoed in the music of the *Oresteia* are made to resound among the ruins of Gibellina, like a bridge between the harsh destinies of the two cities: Mycenae, the birthplace of blood-soaked myths, a pawn in the games of gods and men, and Gibellina, a Sicilian village condemned by nature's wrath to obliteration and then resuscitated by the will of its inhabitants. This parallel, which may seem arbitrary to some, is instead validated by the invocation of another city: Troy. Leveled by the Greek army commanded by the King of Mycenae, it is the symbol of the oscillation between death and rebirth. And so for three successive nights in August, under the moon's indifferent light, we will strive to invoke the shadow of a murdered King, the ambiguous vengeance of the just, the tenuous reconciliation imposed by the gods and the undying beauty of the faces of the passers-by.⁶⁵

Subsequently, the director lets the story unfold in ample choral movements, simple and powerful;

[...] the lights that interpret the space, altering the distances and perspectives we perceive, focus our attention on the small gestures, on the intimate story portrayed by the actors. Up there, in the crumbling ruins of the house, we see a red-robed Clytemnestra waiting for her son, for her fate. Much closer, we almost feel the hand of Orestes as he grasps the knife proffered by Cletra, who hands him destiny's heavy burden, that knife that he will suddenly use, shattering the order of the mind in a single, burning instant of astonishment. Up above, atop it all, where a band of boys and girls have burst in, like a flurry of Furies, stands the powerful, white statue of Athena. [...] Spaces, from distant rites of a Greece reflected in the customs of yesteryear's Sicily. Spaces that allude to a tragedy that seems so familiar, as if it had always been in all our souls.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Paolo Petroni, *Sui ruderi della vecchia Gibellina risuona forte il canto di Eschilo*, op. cit.

⁶⁵ Yannis Kokkos, *Tre città*, from the performance program, Edizioni Orestyadi di Gibellina, 1987, p. 27.

⁶⁶ Lorenzo Arruga, *Troppi decibel per questa Grecia*, in "Il Giorno", 23 August 1987.

The statue of Athena, twelve meters high and supported by a trellis, was realized by Carlo La Monica using eighty square meters of Styrofoam.

We had planned to raise the statue of Athena on stage, from a supine to a standing position, using a hydraulic lift. Around the sculpture we set up scaffolding with metal tubing, and we began to shape the Styrofoam block using chainsaws.⁶⁷

The most difficult thing was undoubtedly matching the staging to the music; however

[...] the various pieces composed by Xenakis (melodic, ethnic, with Orff-like accents), are best rendered visually by movements of the choruses. As in the episode of *The Libation Bearers*, when an infinite number of pinpoints of light glimmer in the crevices of Burri's white cretto⁶⁸, illuminating and shaping the vast procession of women to Agamemnon's tomb. Or in the aggregation of the argives under the raised model of Mycenae, or the re-establishment of an order that reflects all the odious violence of Aegisthos and of more recent totalitarian episodes in the roar of the soldiers' arms [...] Particularly striking is the fury with which the maddened Erynnēs, clad in their cloaks of persecutory yellow, hurl themselves on their victims, when, in a second moment, we discover them to be children. There are, in summary, all the aspects of people's theater, used to personify Xenakis' music, and not gratuitously, but delivered with the impact of a colossal movie production.⁶⁹

Kokkos' direction grasps the affinities between Aeschylus' text and the place where the tragedy is staged: Mycenae, bathed in blood, and Gibellina, condemned to oblivion by the forces of nature. A difficult enactment, in part because of the number of participants: over five hundred counting actors, singers and extras: the former mostly immobile, the others in constant movement. The director's intention is to surprise his audience with unexpected effects, like

[...] the assault of the Erynnēs. More than a break-in, this is an explosion: of shouts (of high children's voices), of instrumental whistles, trills, drum rolls: a triumph, when all is said and done, of amplification (but with regard to this it should be noted that this amplification, frankly excessive, nullifies the planned spatial distribution of the voices, concentrating them in unidirectional mechanical sources, and also attenuates the dynamic variations, by regularly and uniformly amplifying all the voices). And we could also say that the reliance on Byzantine singing at other times is an often-seen expedient used to signal ritualistic elements. Instances such as

⁶⁷ Carlo La Monica, cited in Davide Camarrone, *I Maestri di Gibellina*, op. cit., p. 61.

⁶⁸ Burri's Cretto is considered one of the most imposing European examples of Land Art.

⁶⁹ Gianfranco Capitta, *L'Orestea politica di Xenakis vive come spettacolo di massa*, in "il manifesto", 26 August 1987.

these, intended to capture consensus, contradict the original purpose of the written text, which is an acoustic comment on Aeschylus' tragedy. But they do not ruin it: as ever, the important thing is that the music should be structurally complete and put together tastefully. And there are extraordinary moments, perfectly engaging, like the extended preamble to Orestes' act of vengeance, based on very simple but agitated choral syllables articulated by crisp percussive rhythms. [...] Yannis Kokkos, the director, is fully satisfied to fill the space with black figures in modern garb and farmer's clothing, chosen from among the inhabitants of Gibellina. He makes an informed use of lighting and defines the space with decisive strokes, well calibrated, and justifies it with theatrically effective rituals. And while the final advance of the chorus may be too reminiscent of the march depicted by Pelizza da Volpedo, while the double mimic of Cassandra goes against Xenakis' androgynous conception, while the surge of the militiamen is a bit too facile, all in all the performance holds up quite well.⁷⁰

Kokkos' staging blends the new – presenting Orestes in rolled-up shirtsleeves and the bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegisthos among the ruins – with the ancient, and with an efficiency that owes something to a wholly Italian brand of neorealism, and creates an effective scene with a handful of elementary brushstrokes, mass movements and lighting effects. A series of oriented spaces that offer a few essential points of reference and are located between the emptiness of the ruins and the space where the action occurs, filled by the actors' movements.

We immediately notice in this sequence of frames, of long shots and close-ups (my hand is guided by a cinematic memory, says the director), the contrast between signals of joy, between a certain suggestive archaic naturalness, and the tragic, violent nucleus, which is about to explode.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Michelangelo Zurletti, *Voce solista Cassandra*, in "La Repubblica", 23 August 1987.

⁷¹ Paolo Petroni, *Sui ruderi della vecchia Gibellina risuona forte il canto di Eschilo*, op. cit.