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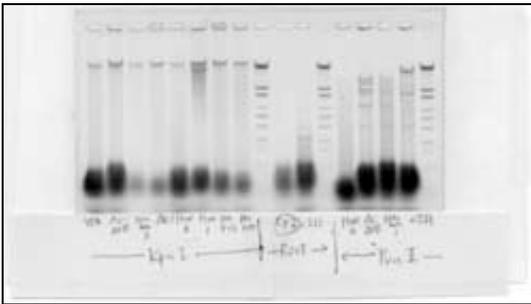
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# Xenakiphilia, LA LEGENDE D'EER

By [Al](#) · July 24, 2005 ·  · [commentellen](#)

IANNIS XENAKIS, *LA LEGENDE D'EER*, DVD and CD, MODE 148



Somewhere in the neighborhood of fifteen years ago, when I lived in Philadelphia, I saw a retrospective of the work of the painter, Francesco Clemente. Surveying his pieces, my eyes were drawn to a series of miniatures he had created in collaboration with some painters from Madras and Jaipur in India, where he spent a third out of every year living and working. The miniatures seemed completely out of time. They were made in gouache on book pages that were over 200 years old. The soluble ink had been washed off, leaving only the *pentimenti*,

and the border of the text served as the frame for Clemente's work, while the calligraphy of the original text was also preserved. Clemente's "Pinxit," as it was called, was my first tangible encounter with the concept of the *palimpsest* a term also closely aligned with the notion of *pentimenti*: a re-inscription over the "trace" of a remainder that had otherwise been erased. However, the concept of the *pentimenti* implies a change of mind that is otherwise absent from the concept of the *palimpsest*. In the case of Clemente's miniatures, the new image always captures the attention of the viewer first of all, but the eyes are quickly drawn into the material that situates the recently created figure. One wishes to unveil that which has been erased and see the miniature in relation to it.

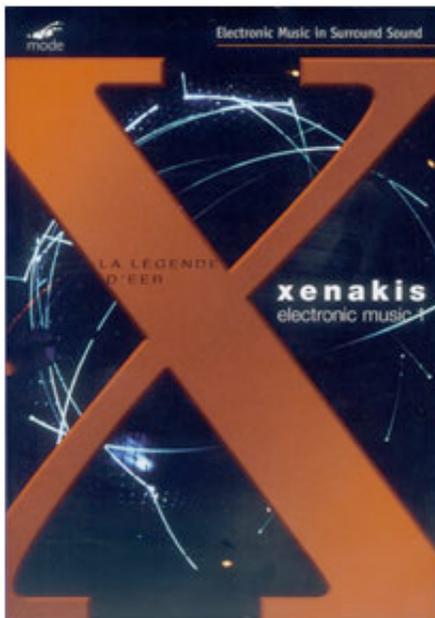
Clemente's *palimpsest* serves as an appropriate metaphor for the phenomenon of the remastered recording. The urgency of the remastering is signaled by a kind of *pentimenti* in relation to a previous recording. Someone has changed his mind, usually in light of technological developments. What came before is not in some way adequate anymore. A reconsideration and reexamination is in order, but the remastered recording will always be inscribed on the figure of the previous one that is elided from memory, all the while leaving its trace. The specter of comparisons always remains. Thus, the reception of the remastered recording can never separate entirely from the *palimpsest* that marks its production.

The recording industry is experiencing a wave of invention. The compact disc is gradually giving way to higher resolution formats. The super audio CD (SACD) and digital versatile disc audio (DVD-A) already appear to be passé as the industry moves toward blu-ray, high definition DVD and CD, and

other formats.

CD was already being supplanted by DVD even before the new high-resolution formats were beginning to emerge. The capability of DVD to extend the frequency range to 24 bit/96 khz already rendered the rolled-off 16 bit/44.1 khz capacity of CD inadequate, at least until mastering into 24 bit/96 khz was enabled for CDs as well as DVDs and a new generation of 24/96 CD players started to emerge.

[Mode Records](#), a label that records classical experimental composers like John Cage and Morton Feldman, has thrown its hat in with DVD and DVD-A. Multi-channel capability seems to be the principal reason, as well as the rendering of visual material (something that SACD cannot do) even though many would argue that SACD's audio extension and single bit direct stream digital surpasses the sonic dividend of DVD-A. Mode has already released two of Morton Subotnick's works on this combination of DVD and DVD-A, both mastered in high definition 24 bit/48 khz, in order to translate the composer's work from four and eight channel tape to 5.1 surround. A pulse-coded modulation (PCM) stereo mix is also included in both recordings, and CD versions are also available.



The Subotnick releases have set the stage for Mode's revelatory reworking of Iannis Xenakis' *La Legende d'Eer*, cut in high-definition 24 bit/96 khz and released on DVD in Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround, DTS 5.1 surround, and, as the Mode case notes, an "uncompressed" 24/96 PCM stereo mix that also turns up on a separately released CD. The new mixes are mastered from the original 7-track analogue tapes by Xenakis' associate at CCMIX, Gerard Pape. The surround mixes are presented with a film composed of 350 photographs from the original performance at the opening of the Centre Georges-Pompidou in Paris in 1978. Bruno Rastoin eloquently captures what must have been a devastating visual accompaniment comprised of 1680 lights, four lasers, and 400 mirrors interacting within the elliptical Diatope designed by Xenakis. Rastoin's digital transfers are lush, saturated and satisfying, but it is unfortunate, though, that no video record of this event exists.

Two booklets accompany the DVD—one is the same as that included with the CD release, and a second DVD-size booklet contains some notes on the films and an essay by Rastoin. The front cover of this booklet is the actual poster of the original performance and the back cover has two photographs of the Diatope—the bottom one from the actual performance has the elliptical structure in a yellowish hue set against the rest of red-lit structure, while the top one has the skeleton of the ellipsis apparently after the performance with materials rolled up on the ground and the grayish adjoining buildings in the background during twilight. In between the two photographs is an injunction to "play loud" in English, French, and German, a request not difficult to accommodate. Finally, a 67-minute discussion between Xenakis and the musicologist Harry Halbreich, which runs the gamut between boring, compelling, and fatuous, is included on the DVD.

My first "encounter" with *La Legende d'Eer* came late—nearly four years ago and some 23 years after the performance in Paris—on the now out-of-print release on Montaigne. I had just received a box of recordings in early November from a distributor in Albuquerque and worked my way through all but the Xenakis by mid-December. Aware of his penchant for the grandiose gesture, for the utter sweep of his compositions, I was delaying my listening to the Xenakis. It had been a year in which an earlier

acquisition of the Erstwhile release *Do* by Toshimaru Nakamura and Sachiko M had been all-consuming, an aesthetic experience of its own with few peers. Finally, I managed to listen to the Xenakis during an afternoon at home. Listening to this recording on that and future occasions was unique in relation to my other listening tendencies and habits: I turned on the CD player's repeat button and then commenced to listen to *La Légende d'Eer* for four successive hours. This was to become my practice for the next few years whenever I played the piece. One time through was insufficient, and because of the opening and closing with the high pitched "shooting stars" sequence, my use of repeat produced a very natural loop of the recording, as if I were witnessing a kind of cosmic orbit. This is Xenakis' effect on the listener. His mathematical precision in constructing his compositions seems to belie the emotive grandiosity produced by his works in his audience.



Though satisfied with the Montaigne release, I did not hesitate to order the Mode versions when they became available, despite my mild disappointment in their not being either an SACD or SACD-hybrid disc in the offing. The DVD version was reason enough and, if nothing else, could serve as a supplement to what I already owned. However, as I listened to both the DVD and CD versions, it was becoming apparent that the Mode releases were producing their own form of a *palimpsest* in relation to the Montaigne recording. My memories of the Montaigne were already fading, under a process of incomplete erasure by the Mode recordings, but there was an irony in my experience of these releases.

While the Mode was eliding the Montaigne, the Montaigne was finally being "unveiled" by the Mode. *La Légende d'Eer* was opening up for the first time and revealing its workings below the sonic surface, starting with the edgy and abrasive treble of the "shooting stars" sequences, which now appear as if surrounded by a black hole creating greater delineation. The Montaigne version sounds muffled in comparison. There is a haze over the top of the recording that I had never noticed before. A comparison is in order.

*La Légende d'Eer* is divisible into six sections, the first of which runs 6:34 on the Montaigne recording and 6:46 on the Mode release. The difference between the two is dramatic. The "sonorous shooting stars" have much greater space and a much darker background on the Mode release. The sounds are also far more metallic in resonance, and the separate pitches are more apparent. When a friend and I listened to the recording a couple of weeks ago and tried to speak during the first section, we noticed our voices seemed to have changed, as if the shooting stars were attacking our respective Eustachian tubes, creating a phlegm-like overtone. The sonorous effect was more than evident.

What we get on the Mode reissues in comparison to the previous release on Montaigne are more details about the sources of Xenakis' sounds. Three categories of sounds are in use: instrumental sounds, like the guimbardes, an African Jew's harp, the Tzuzumis, hour-glass shaped Japanese drums, as well as the sonorous shooting stars; noises (special bricks struck together and rubbed cardboard, for example); and probability determinations from computer—Xenakis' stochastic synthesis. The second section, running from 6:34 to 19:18 on the Montaigne release and to 19:30 on the Mode is where the clear differences in the recordings begin to emerge. The Mode release has clear and deep stage delineation. The different sounds are readily discernable, moving from logarithmic sounds appearing and disappearing, "eel" or water sounds, "cymbal" and then the African guimbarde, "tiles," the bricks beaten together, and then electronic sounds leading to white noise.

The third section, running from 19:19 to 25:12 on the Mode release, is a slightly more restrained transitional section starting with the Tzuzumis and then leading into the more frenetic washes of the small wooden chimes. This section closes with the cardboard rubbing foregrounded. The other sounds

continue in the background. As Makis Solomos notes in his commentary in the accompanying booklet, the fourth section, in contrast to the quiet “cosmogony” of the first section with the shooting stars, “attains the deafening phase of the cosmogony,” running until well after the 33 minute mark. Electronic sounds are the principal source material here along with what sounds like an electric guitar or double bass. Very early into this sequence, a kind of electronic hiccup emerges and leads toward an intense crescendo. Whereas the guitar/bass sounds are muffled and nearly indistinguishable on the Montaigne recording, they are clearly demarcated on the Mode release and even foregrounded, at times approaching the sound of feedback. Abrasive scraping sounds amplify from the right channel on the Mode CD. Intense, almost nightmarish cycles appear in this breathtaking section, which is dramatically opened up for the first time on the remastered recording with more clear separation of the varied revolving cycles and marked out in greater detail.

The fifth section has greater length on the Mode release. It runs from 32:55 to 40:16 on the Montaigne, and from around 33:14 to 40:56 on the Mode. Solomos states that this is another transitional moment, which begins with buzzing, midrange drones and metallic plucks and scrapes that sound like amplified water drops echoing out of a metal bowl. Bows grate over stringed instruments and cricket-like chirps become apparent at 36 minutes on the Montaigne recording but are more recessed on the Mode. A very deep contrabass drone surfaces at 37 minutes and more of the abrasive washes and seeming guitar feedback intervene until near the 38th minute, when a gradual descent starts and the right channel drops into deep bass sounds. While the sixth section begins at 40:16 on the Montaigne release with the gradual appearance of a different series of shooting stars, the contrabass drone continues on the Mode release, raising and dropping in pitch and sometimes becoming distorted until 40:56 when the shooting stars reappear. This drone slows and recedes by 41:15 on the Montaigne and 42:00 on the Mode. Then, the drone pans left, right, and then left again before dropping out altogether at 43:00 on the Montaigne; however, on the Mode recording, this deep bass drone does not pan but rather dwells in the left channel for the duration, changing projection and timbre until 44:06, when it stops. The shooting stars continue in isolation for two additional minutes on the Montaigne but three on the Mode, steadily withdrawing until 45 and 47 minutes respectively, with an additional 26 seconds of silence attached to the end of the piece in both recordings. The two additional minutes of music are not crucial here but the better separation of sounds and greater special dimensions and wider staging render the improvements in the Mode remastering essential listening.

What the Montaigne release has that the Mode release lacks are the longer excerpts from the texts that Xenakis quotes during the performance. For those lacking a copy of Plato, Montaigne supplies two pages from the end of *The Republic* on the legend of Er, whose afterlife experience of the heavens stands as an injunction for an ethics, just as he awakens from his apparent death right before what would have been his cremation on a funeral pyre. It is not hard to see Xenakis' inspiration in this closing poetic moment of Plato's text: the spindle of Necessity made from steel “on which all the revolutions turn”; a siren dwells on the top of each circle singing a single note; the Fates, daughters of Necessity, accompany the sirens with songs of the past, present, and future; and when the souls passed through Necessity to consume the waters of Unmindfulness, they shot up to the heavens like “shooting stars.” Additional texts by Hermes Trismegistus, Pascal, Jean-Paul's *Siebenkäs*, and Robert P. Kirshner's book on supernovas are also included to provide context for Xenakis' quotations. It is unfortunate that the Mode CD and DVD do not contain these.

The filmed discussion between Halbreich and Xenakis is clearly an amateur work. The camcorder retains the date of the filming, March 6, 1995, in the lower right corner for the duration of 67 minutes. The lighting comes from the left side on Xenakis and washes out his face for most of the discussion. The tripod is overly tight, which leads to shaking of the camcorder. The focus is not well-maintained

and the zoom is too quick and heavy. Early on, Xenakis advances the notion that composing has to be very free, but it is a concept that Halbreich does not seem to adequately comprehend as he continues to push the idea that constraints are necessary in determining freedom. In response, Xenakis states his definition of freedom: free “means rejecting older things, even older things you wrote.” This comes after his discussion of Schoenberg and Webern, whose music he finds too constraining. Xenakis also explains his influences from mathematics, probability, and theoretical logic, noting his concept of “formalized” or stochastic music owing a debt to Bertrand Russell’s formal logic. Finally, he states to Halbreich that in his music he does not wish to communicate anything specific. But instead the composer “must resolve for himself aesthetic problems and technical problems,” one of which is the problem of “old” and “new” music. Xenakis concludes: “I try to forget old music because then I would write old music. It doesn’t mean that the new music I write is really new, but I try to do that.” To those who wish to hang on to genres like old clothes, Xenakis provides a lesson to listeners as well—music has to move forward. Music isn’t the preservation of old forms but the invention of new ones.

Outside the obvious benefits of remastering, particularly when carried out by a Xenakis insider like Gerard Pape, the reader might wonder finally whether the use and purchase of high resolution formats, like 24/96 or SACD or DVD-A, are worth it when the human ear can only attend to frequencies up to 20 khz and when the average 16/44.1 CD is rolled off at 22 khz, just beyond the documented capacity of the human ear.<sup>1</sup> Some have argued that the hyped 24/96 upsampling capacity is really an oversampling that derives its benefits more from the use of better digital filters rather than an inherent improvement in frequency range. Nonetheless, Brian Dipert has noted that research in neurophysiology suggests “increased brain activity in response to high-resolution audio, even when listeners don’t report any audible difference between that audio and more conventional music formats.”<sup>2</sup> More work is needed in understanding how humans can process sonic information beyond the frequency band of ostensible human capacity. In the meantime, since my ears do not need any scientific validation beyond what they can already sense, I’ll take an SACD version of *La Legende d’Eer* any day of the week.

~Bill Ashline

<sup>1</sup> See John Atkinson. “Upsampling or Oversampling.” *Stereophile*. (Dec. 2000) June 28, 2005 <http://stereophile.com/asweseeit/344/>; “Upsampling, Upconversion and Oversampling: A Marketing Synonym Game.” *Simaudio* Webpage. (June 18, 2005) June 28, 2005 <http://www.simaudio.com/upsampling.htm>. See also: [http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum\\_posts.asp?TID=6962&get=last](http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=6962&get=last)

<sup>2</sup> Brian Dipert. “Signal to Noise: Calculating the High-Resolution-Audio Reality-to-Hype Ratio.” *EDN: Voice of the Electronics Engineer*. (Feb. 20, 2003) June 28, 2005 <http://www.edn.com/article/CA276213.html#ref>



## Discussion

### 9 comments for “Xenakiphilia, LA LEGENDE D’EER”

1. A splendid piece of work, about a splendid piece of work! Bravo! I agree wholeheartedly about the Halbreich chit chat; most late Xenakis interviews are pretty harrowing affairs, especially in the light of his clearly deteriorating health. This one could have been skipped altogether, as far

as I'm concerned.

I was wondering Bill what you made of the Persepolis remix job on Asphodel a couple of years back (which I won't go into again, having made my own views on the subject abundantly clear on my own website and in Signal To Noise).

*Posted by Dan Warburton | [July 28, 2005, 6:46 am](#)*

2. Great stuff. Really interesting. Thanks!

*Posted by walto | [July 28, 2005, 7:42 am](#)*

3. Bill:

Very nicely done!

I have both, the palimpsest having only one spin thus far. You've given me another set of acutely attuned ears to accompany my own listening. Thanks.

*Posted by Jesse | [July 28, 2005, 8:47 am](#)*

4. Thanks Dan, Walto and Jesse for the kind feedback.

Dan, I have the Persepolis remix on Asphodel as well as the Fractal. I listened to the remix a couple of times before storing it on the shelf. I haven't felt a need or desire to return to it, so I guess that would pretty much sum up my reactions to it. I've grown quite tired of the whole phenomenon of remixing in general and I think Xenakis is probably more poorly served than most by it.

Al, great work on the layout and editing of this piece. Very professional and impressive. Thanks much.

*Posted by Bill Ashline | [July 28, 2005, 2:12 pm](#)*

5. thanks a lot for this, Bill, that must have taken a lot of time. I've been a fan of the Montaigne version for a long time, maybe my favorite piece of "classical" electroacoustic music ever. I haven't had a chance to listen to the Mode one much yet, it'll be interesting to see how my impressions correlate on a much inferior sound system.

just to clarify: Dan, when you ask about the Asphodel "remix" of Persepolis, are you talking about the actual piece or the second disc of remixes? I got the feeling it was the former. there have been three releases of Persepolis on CD, the two you mention and one on Edition RZ. I prefer the Fractal of the three, but that may just be because it's the one I heard first, not sure.

*Posted by [jon abbey](#) | [July 28, 2005, 8:26 pm](#)*

6. "When you ask about the Asphodel "remix" of Persepolis, are you talking about the actual piece or the second disc of remixes?"

Both, actually – Teruggi's take on the piece is drastically different from the Fractal (which Jerome Genin assures me was intended to stay as close to the old vinyl version as possible, without the side break o'course), much more tinkly and "French".. as for the guest remixes, less said the better. Last time I tried to find anything out about it I got a seriously abusive email from Karkowski, and a lot of grief from Asphodel. The whole project was appalling. How quality musicians like Otomo and Lopez could put their name on such a crappy piece of work I don't

understand – remember the “politically correct” liner notes? Pass the sickbag, Alice. Case closed. I don't have the RZ. I stick with the Fractal.

*Posted by Dan Warburton | [July 28, 2005, 10:30 pm](#)*

7. >

see, this was my extremely initial impression for the new Mode stereo version of Legende d'Eer also. I got the sense there was a lot more sound there, but I didn't enjoy it nearly as much. I'm curious to hear your take on it when you get there, I know I need to spend some more time with them myself.

*Posted by [jon abbey](#) | [July 28, 2005, 10:37 pm](#)*

8. (someone please delete my above post, thanks)

“much more tinkly and ‘French’”

see, this was my extremely initial impression for the new Mode stereo version of Legende d'Eer also. I got the sense there was a lot more sound there, but I didn't enjoy it nearly as much. I'm curious to hear your take on it when you get there, I know I need to spend some more time with them myself.

*Posted by [jon abbey](#) | [July 28, 2005, 10:42 pm](#)*

9. Excellent, Bill! Thanks a million!

*Posted by Michael Schaumann | [August 1, 2005, 3:51 pm](#)*

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