Interview with Emmanuelle Huynh and Caty Olive

Emmanuelle, you have choreographed and worked on the music of Iannis Xenakis before, for your 2009 production *Cribles*. What in his compositions and theories resonates with your own choreographic approaches and artistic considerations?

Emmanuelle Huynh: First it is important to say that I don't take the relationship between music and dance for granted. There is not always music with my dance pieces; I've worked a lot with silence, poetry and gestures, maybe more like a visual artist. So at that time, I wanted to look at a music score and see if I was able to use music as a protagonist. Back then, I was also a dancer in *The Rite of Spring* by Stravinsky choreographed by Dominique Brun, inspired by Nijinsky. For me it was such an intense experience to dance to this music that I wanted to find something that would make us rise up, and leap up, with sheer energy.

Also I wanted to continue with a formal challenge that I had touched on in some of my previous pieces in which I linked dancers hand-in-hand, to form a circle. Listening to *Persephassa* by Xenakis I found it incredibly powerful; I later understood that it was a piece for a circle of percussionists. It also became clear that Xenakis's music has powerful archaic forces. I liked that the musicians are physically very engaged and committed; it's a piece that celebrates the movement of the dancers and the musicians, all of whom are producing sound. And in a way our *Kraanerg* also celebrates bodies all melting together to produce and represent sound.

How did the two of you encounter *Kraanerg* during your artistic collaboration, and where did you start from in your staging and interpretation of it?

EH: All our inspiration came from *Kraanerg* and Xenakis: by hearing and studying what Xenakis's intentions were with *Kraanerg*. It was about this energy that he wanted to unleash and allow the audience to experience. But also more generally about how Xenakis worked and revolutionized music using mathematics, his life as an engineer, as an architect, even as a resistance fighter. And what he did with other pieces such as *Polytopes*, where not only the music, but also the architecture of the space, the light and the way in which the audience is arranged were all conceived by him. Caty and I worked together 20 years ago, and then more recently for my piece entitled *Nuée*. This collaboration was a very powerful artistic experience and, when the topic of architecture came up in our conversation about *Kraanerg*, I wanted to invite Caty to give some thought to and create the spatial architecture using light.

Caty Olive: Our historical approach was facilitated by our exchanges with the two musicologists Makis Solomos and Benoit Gibson. We were aware of the way that Xenakis used space and approached the music beyond the sound itself, but also as a sonic and visual space. So that was the direction we wanted to go in. If you look at the photograph that we have of the initial commissioned project for *Kraanerg* in 1968, it was quite a static vision. We knew that Viktor Vasarely as one of most renowned visual and kinetic artists had done the scenography back then, so we wondered what it would be like to start with these images but then imagine something in motion for our new version of *Kraanerg*: a kind of kinetic space. That, then, was our initial historical approach, but we decided very early on to take the idea of using movement and energy to make light appear and, through that, then make the space appear.
The Klangforum musicians are on the stage and part of the space. To play this composition they have to form two blocks: one block with the strings and one block with the ~~wood~~winds,

with Sylvain Cambreling as the third point of the triangle. Like Emmanuelle with the choreography, I too was interested in the musicians' movements to depict the music within the space. I decided to do it in a very analogue way by capturing the orchestra using a multi-camera recording device and then graphically processing the footage to turn it into animated black-and-white light that is then projected back onto them and onto the stage. Referencing Vasarely's art, we rendered the light as vertical lines and put it into motion based on the gestures of the musicians and the conductor. So the music is made visible through the gestures of the orchestra. It's this very simple relationship between the musicians' bodies and the dancers' bodies, along with the rhythm and space, that is so exciting for us.

***Kraanerg* was originally scored as ballet music and premiered in 1969 with choreography by Roland Petit. In your choreography, four dancers share the space with the orchestra. How do you work with the dancers' bodies on stage?**

EH: We were both interested in getting to know the process that Xenakis used with *Kraanerg*. It was important to listen to Xenakis's political, aesthetic and personal artistic context. Even though we are not replicating *Kraanerg*, I like to know why people do what they do. I understood that Xenakis didn't have that much time to do the piece, so he recycled things that already existed. The situation was similar for us, too, and so I decided to follow that process of recycling principles and excerpts that already existed in my own body of work. In that sense it is a sort of meta-choreography and perhaps the first time I dared to transpose my own vocabulary of dance, coming from *Múa* (1995), *Tout Contre* (1998), *A vida Enorme* (2002), *Cribles* (2009), *Spiel* (2011), *Saint Nazaire Morning Dance*, (2019), *Nuée* (2021).

The orchestra is visible and in motion while it is playing, but there is no physical body to sustain the electronic soundtrack of the tape. I thought the four dancers could be the hidden body of the tape. And except for two movements where we break with this rule, they would only move when the tape is playing, sometimes with the orchestra, sometimes alone.

What was your entry point into the very complex musical score for *Kraanerg*? How did you approach it?

CO: For most of this score, our understanding was greatly facilitated by Benoit Gibson and Makis Solomos. It is indeed very complex, but at the same time its principle is quite simple. Certainly not simple to play, but simple to understand visually. You've got the two blocks of musicians, a line for the tape, and then there's the silence.
But even in the parts where the musicians are not playing, they might scratch their arm or shift the position of their body – and we might find those movements interesting, too. For me the difficulty is to edit the movement footage captured by the different cameras. At times I might play more with the rhythm of the violinists; at others, it's a wider frame featuring all the orchestra, in which case it is a bit more like a vibration. It is all about being in dialogue with the score and using the score to compose the light.

EH: Thinking of Xenakis's *masse sonore*, the way he creates these really huge volumes within the sound, we have found it helpful to imagine we were making a sculpture – one that is made up of bodies, sound, movement and light through graphic animations, something of a *sculpture sonore*.

Much has been written about the fact that, when composing *Kraanerg*, Xenakis was inspired by the energy and rebellion of the social uprisings and youth movements of 1968. Are those inherent utopian ideas something you considered as well?

EH: It’s really important to realise that Xenakis created *Kraanerg* just after May 68. He himself was not that close to the movement, even though he was in the resistance and managed to escape Greece and its dictatorship. But he did think that, in the future, there would be so many people on earth that powerful movements and perhaps even rebellions will emerge. We can hear that in this music, the fact there is so much energy. It is so powerful that it’s impossible to stand still. And at some point I took that as my guideline for extracting elements from the pieces I had done previously. Choosing the ones that could carry or could be carried by all this strength and rebellion. So it’s not so much that we worked on rebellion in this piece but that there is rebellion in the score itself and that we can then use it to guide us at certain moments.

Emmanuelle Huynh and Caty Olive spoke to Carolina Nöbauer