

BOOKS

Roger Reynolds and Karen Reynolds, *Xenakis Creates in Architecture and Music: The Reynolds Desert House*, Routledge, 2022, 246 pp. £39.99.

‘If you could be anywhere, where would you be?’¹ For most composers and performers, such a question sits on the border between daydream and reality. For Roger and Karen Reynolds, their answer – a matter of hours after the question was put to them – led to a three-year fellowship in Japan. This is just one of many remarkable events, meetings and conversations described in this book. While Xenakis’ approaches to music, architecture and the design of the Reynolds Desert House provide an overarching structure, the content is fascinatingly discursive, supplemented by reproductions of photographs, letters and architectural sketches. Additional materials, including colour reproductions of some of the photographs, are available at Roger Reynolds’ website, complementing the authors’ evocative writing.

Given the number and enduring prominence of Xenakis’ compositions, it is perhaps unsurprising that, until now, more attention has been paid to the architectural characteristics of his music than to the musical implications of his architecture. Working in the studio of Le Corbusier and studying with Olivier Messiaen in Paris, his musical output developed close to one of the epicentres of mid-twentieth-century European modernism. In light of his training and career, Xenakis’ compositions have often been viewed through the prism of architectural analogy. Roger and Karen Reynolds redress this imbalance, stating that ‘[t]his monograph draws upon the architectural aspects of Xenakis’s capacities as they manifest parallels with music – its sources, its creation, its specification’.²

The authors’ succinct, rather dry summary belies the generous expansiveness of this book. Organised into eight chapters, it gives a remarkable insight into the development of a project, in parallel with – and intimately linked to – the lives of those involved. For anyone unfamiliar with

the Reynolds Desert House, a question immediately arises: why did a composer, living in Paris, offer to design a house for his friends in the Anza-Borrego desert of southern California? Chapter One, ‘Chronicle of a Friendship’, contextualises this question, providing a chronological overview of the acquaintance between Roger and Karen Reynolds and Iannis and Françoise Xenakis. The first chapter also introduces materials that are discussed in subsequent pages; letters, sketches and detailed accounts of travels, music festivals, compositions and performances all serve to contextualise the evolving design of the Reynolds Desert House. There are also dinners, conversations and conferences, in which we encounter a formidable array of composers and performers – Tōru Takemitsu, the Arditti Quartet and a postgraduate Chaya Czernowin, to mention only a few. This is not a matter of name-dropping; a picture emerges of somewhat gregarious, hard-working and idealistic individuals, deeply committed to their musical and interpersonal networks. This was the environment in which the Reynolds Desert House grew from an idea into a full-scale architectural plan.

Chapters Two to Six focus on different aspects of Xenakis’ architectural designs, often elaborating on the exchange of letters outlined in Chapter One. Detailed descriptions and plans illustrate the project’s gradual progression. Topics range from philosophical and aesthetic considerations to practical issues such as seismic activity and increasing costs. Paradoxically, one of the great strengths of this book is that its authors, although closely involved in every stage of the design process, are not architects. As musicians, Roger and Karen Reynolds draw insightful parallels between visual ideas and sound, translating architectural concepts into relatable musical examples. In Chapter Four, ‘Using Space’, the relationship between the upper and lower layers of the Reynolds Desert House is compared to Xenakis’ use of counterpoint in *Thallein*. Similarly, in Chapter Five, ‘Illumination’, the varying widths of glass panes are compared to ‘beats’, subdivided in different ways to create a type of fluctuating musical tempo. When more specific architectural examples are needed, illustrations and descriptions

¹ Roger Reynolds and Karen Reynolds, *Xenakis Creates in Architecture and Music: The Reynolds Desert House* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge: 2022), p. 137.

² *Ibid.*, p. 185.

of Xenakis' existing buildings, such as François-Bernard Mâche's Greek holiday home, provide useful references.

Chapter Seven, 'Some Closer Looks', continues the discursive breadth that was introduced in the opening chapter. In excerpts from Roger's notes, there are brief, evocative vignettes; sipping kitrone with Marie-Luce and François-Bernard Mâche on the island of Amorgos, or musings on a boat journey across the Mediterranean. It is clear that Karen and Roger Reynolds formed enduring friendships with their musical colleagues. Letters between Xenakis, Karen and Roger include philosophical questions about life and art, discussions of the serious illnesses that affected both Roger and Iannis and contemplations of friendship. In another setting, this could all seem a little saccharine – happy, successful couples, travelling the world yet cocooned by the prestige of their achievements. This is not the case in this book. Instead, personal reflections, anecdotes and expressions of feeling serve to underline the touching honesty, even idealism, at the heart of this project. All this supplementary material suggests that the Reynolds Desert House was not just a plan for a building, but an idea that grew with and from human connections and the exchange of ideas.

The final 11 pages of Chapter Seven are a transcript of a public discussion between four composers at Delphi Computer Music Conference/Festival in 1992. Although this could seem like a digression, it provides a fascinating insight into the thoughts of Paul Lansky, François-Bernard Mâche, Roger Reynolds and Iannis Xenakis. The pivot towards more generalised musical and philosophical themes sets the scene for Chapter Eight, 'Creation: A Personal Assessment'. Three of Xenakis' works are considered: *Achorripsis*, *Thallein* and *Tetras*. The authors state that they do not intend to provide a musically detailed study of these works. Nonetheless, the analysis provided is thorough and informative. References are supported by relevant score excerpts. Discussion of *Achorripsis* acknowledges similarities with Xenakis' writing in *Formalized Music*, presented here in ways that are 'less detailed and more carefully illuminated'.³ Complex materials, including mathematical formulae, tables of probabilities and a copy of the matrix that Xenakis used in *Achorripsis* are explained clearly and succinctly. Similar precision is demonstrated in the section-by-section discussion of *Thallein*. Analysis of *Tetras* usefully focuses on how a listener might comprehend

the work. Throughout the final chapter, architectural analogies and parallels with the Reynolds Desert House link musical materials to previous chapters.

The closing section returns to Xenakis' music. As elsewhere, evocative scenes and incisive summaries make for an engaging read, yet I was left feeling that there were unanswered (or perhaps unasked) questions. What is the authors' final assessment of the Reynolds Desert House project? Given the candid tone of previous chapters, the absence of a definitive evaluation is striking. Although the Reynolds Desert House was never built, the book bears witness to the creativity and friendships that grew with the project over 30 years. As a catalysing force, the strength of its impact is surely reflected in the richness of supplementary materials, including letters, journal entries and photographs, that bring each chapter vividly to life. The very existence of this book indicates that the absence of a completed building need not be seen as a failure. Perhaps the conclusion is necessarily open-ended while the house remains unbuilt. The idea of the Reynolds Desert House provides a frame through which the authors invite us to view decades of artistic endeavour and friendship. This book is an affirmative testament to the abundant creativity of lives lived to the full.

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Sanne Krogh Groth and Holger Schulze, eds, *Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound Art*, Bloomsbury, 2022, 592 pp., £35.99.

I have long held the view that the impact of recording technology is far from adequately appreciated in the critical discourse on music. Every new book or paper that brings a fresh perspective on the revolutionary change in the art form is worth celebrating. I was very pleased, then, to read the opening lines of the introduction to the *Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound Art*, the opening gambit of the whole volume:

The voice I hear is strange. It is too intimate, too close, too alluring – and still it keeps an almost professional distance. I hear waves rushing in and fading away under sounds of various, unclear origin. I like to listen to this voice. Many people are listening these days to rather intimate or more vivid and invigorated voices on a daily basis. Voices from a lively conversation podcast...

That podcasts, or sonically mediated 'para-social relationships', are the first example sets the terms

³ *Ibid.*, p. 188.