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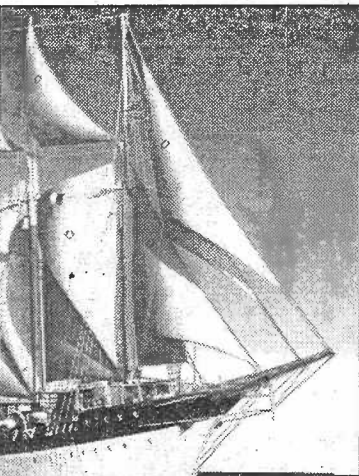
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To Dream the Postmodernist Dream

Xenakis Meets DJ Spooky
 By Kyle Gann

Iannis Xenakis and DJ Spooky? The genius composer of '50s European modernism and the rising bad boy of hip-hop? The Greek resistance fighter, who pioneered the calculus of noise, and the dreadlocked, ambient sampler of rare recordings and random sounds? High art and low, old and young, will perform together, with the ST-X Ensemble Xenakis USA, November 12 at Cooper Union.

It would be wonderful, wouldn't it, to find some rapprochement between the generations. Our young artists yearn for a blessing from their modernist grandfathers, but it doesn't seem forthcoming. The giants who created 20th-century music—Ligeti and Boulez, Babbitt and Elliott Carter—are too trapped in their audience-scorning worldview to recognize that today's avant-gardists are continuing the work they started. The complexity, noisiness, and downright ugliness of postwar music liberated us from stifling conventions. But it turned out that the modernist grandfathers didn't want to liberate music from European tradition; the only freedom they intended to offer was the right to imitate them. So when today's composers committed the sin of writing accessible, vernacular music, most of the older composers turned their backs on their wayward progeny.

But there's always hope that someday, some prodigal son will be welcomed home. That's why I'm on the phone, linking DJ Spooky, age 26, on tour in Albuquerque, with Monsieur Xenakis, 74, in Paris. Spooky (who writes for the *Voice* as Paul D. Miller) has been invited to operate the machinery in a new, digital manifestation of *Kraanergy*, Xenakis's 75-minute, 1968 classic for tape and orchestra.

Why Spooky? He was the choice of Charles Zachary Bornstein, conductor of the ST-X Ensemble, who felt his expertise in spinning discs might ease some of *Kraanergy's* traditional problems. "The score for the musicians is done in conventional notated time," Spooky explains, "but the score for the tape is done almost

as a flow chart. My timed cues are very precise. The orchestra is playing right up to the edge of the recorded material, and the difficulty has always been that the person playing the tape would leave a pause of some sort. They couldn't make it seamless." The Cooper Union performance (produced by the 92nd Street Y) is the premiere of a new digital version, in which a DJ makes the media mix.

Spooky sees *Kraanergy* as an extension of his interest in synchronizing recorded sounds and artfully splicing them together. The biggest difference for him is that he usually doesn't work with live performers. Also, working in the Afrocentric world of hip-hop, his music is quintessentially improvisational, and following a strict and complex score will be an unusual experience. He does have some leeway, however: "My improvisation will consist of switching the placement of the sound around the room: left to right, up to down, vertical to horizontal. That's what the conductor left up to me."

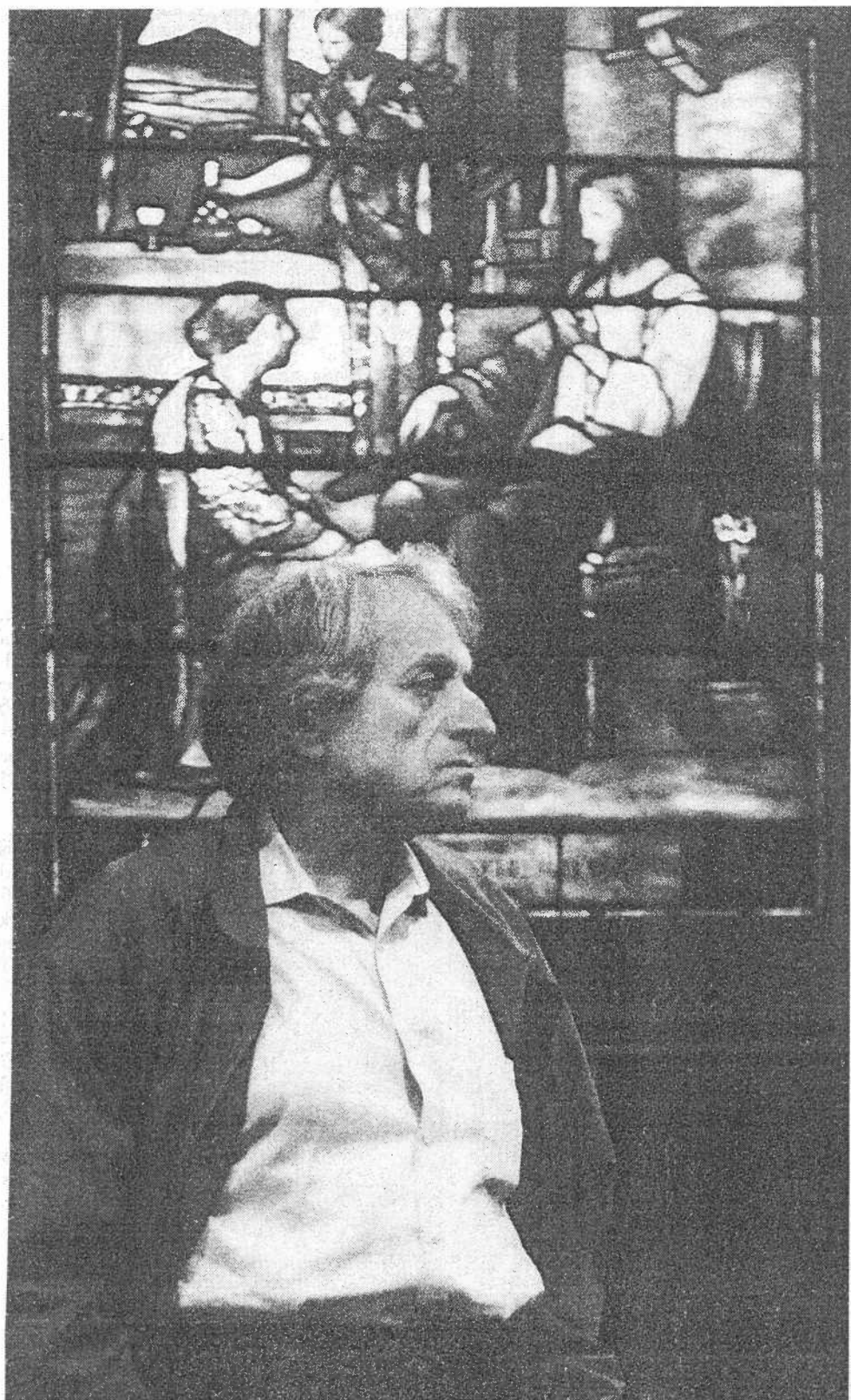
Xenakis, for his part, has little idea that a popular Manhattan musician with his own aesthetic and following is involved in this digital



D.J. Spooky: "a kind of controlled delirium."

restoration. Given his background, he could care less how hip-hop relates to his work retroactively.

In the '40s, after receiving a severe face wound and a death sentence while fighting the Nazis in the Greek resistance, Xenakis escaped to Paris and worked with the architect Le Corbusier. His early works, such as *Kraanergy* (originally a ballet), epitomize an architectural approach to music, filling out great arches of space



Iannis Xenakis: "Watt eez dee-zhay?"

with textures defined according to mathematical probabilities, a type of directed randomness known as a stochastic process. In the '80s, he developed the UPIC system, a computerized algorithm that allows one to draw shapes on a screen, which the computer translates into sound. His music became noisier and less elegant; it was more exciting to hear an orchestra generate a detailed analog version of noise than to hear the computer spit out noise at the flick of a key.

Both composers have a tendency toward incomprehensibility: Xenakis speaks integral calculus, Spooky speaks fluent Foucault and Derrida. Although both can converse in French, I can't seem to bring them within a few light-years of being on the same wavelength.

Spooky, who was born two years after *Kraanery* was composed, took an early interest in Xenakis's musical fusion of physics and architecture. As an intense student of recent French intellectual history, he hears *Kraanery* as a reflection of the violence and tumult of the student riots of 1968. Xenakis, ever the formalist from a formalist generation, doesn't speak in such associative terms. Xenakis had turned to math to create what he thought were forms of

classical perfection; postmodern Spooky hears in those tortured forms "free association and the psychological impact of memory, a kind of controlled delirium."

Today, Xenakis is busy writing pieces for Swedish and German orchestras, and doesn't employ the complex math he used to: "The stochastic way of composing is something that is innate now. I don't need to use the computers anymore." Neither does Spooky need math to reflect the chaotic ideas he draws from Xenakis's early work. But Xenakis seems to wonder why these two crazy young Americans have called him. There will be no meeting of the minds today.

When I ask his impression of DJ Spooky's work, Xenakis replies, "Watt eez dee-zhay?" Spooky explains in smooth French that he performs on turntables, making collages out of recordings. Xenakis thinks that sounds interesting, and asks Spooky to send him some recordings.

So has Xenakis kept up with any American music?

"No."

How about the younger European composers?

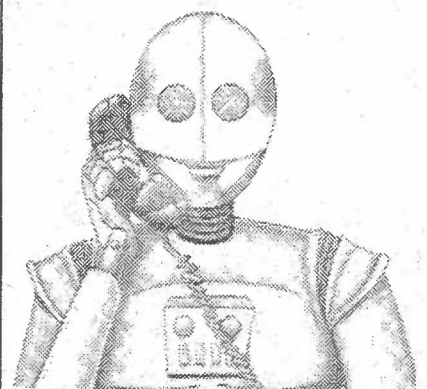
"No. [Pause] I don't want to be influenced."

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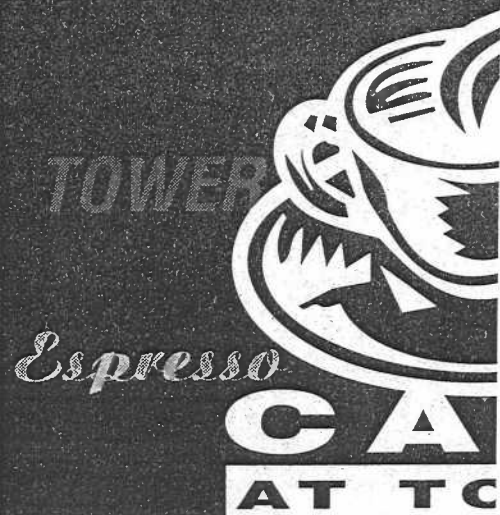
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