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## IN REVIEW

## NEW YORK CITY — *Oresteia*, Miller Theatre at Columbia University, 9/13/08

On September 13, The Miller Theater opened its twentieth season with the U.S. premiere of the complete version of *Oresteia* by Greek composer Iannis Xenakis. Xenakis (1922–2001) was one of the most significant musical voices of the post-World War II generation, an august group that also included Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luigi Nono and Luciano Berio. *Oresteia*, Xenakis's treatment of the great trilogy of plays by Aeschylus, is his only opera; it was developed segmentally throughout a thirty-year period and is the composer's longest work. It is also his most conservative work, employing modal chant with microtonal tunings and a minimum of the aleatoric (controlled indeterminacy) procedures that are such a hallmark of his compositional voice. Xenakis put everything he knew into this music, from Greek Orthodox plainchant through his most advanced musical techniques: the result conveys a sense of timeless profundity.

As a student in Paris in the early 1950s, Xenakis was no doubt influenced by the theories of Antonin Artaud on the need for a new form of theater, one that eschews the conventional. Thus, his setting of the *Oresteia* is not a literal narrative, although it generally follows the sequence of action set in motion by the murders of the Greek King Agamemnon and the Trojan princess and prophetess Cassandra. Xenakis has given us a work of "total theater," incorporating music and dance into a more abstract meditation on the trilogy. In effect, *Oresteia* is more of a grand spectacle than a work of music theater. If one were unfamiliar with the plays, the narrative would prove hard to follow. Nevertheless, the music is powerful, evocative and engaging, especially in the capable hands of this production's creative team.

*Oresteia* is scored for bass, chorus, children's chorus and a percussion-rich instrumental ensemble. Baritone Wilbur Pauley gave an astonishing performance of the solo vocal lines. His various roles required him to cover a range from the deepest basso profundo pitches to wails and keening that would challenge a soprano. He was at his best in the extended section in which he accompanied himself on the psaltery, portraying both Cassandra, offering her final prophecy, and the crowd of elders misunderstanding her.

The chorus plays an enormous role in *Oresteia*. The male chorus exclusively is used in the *Agamemnon* portion of the opera; ditto the female chorus in the *Choephores* (Libation Bearers) segment. The entire chorus comes into play only in the *Eumenides* (Furies) section. No listing for the chorus master was given in the program, but that person is to be commended. The men sang with great power, and the women gave an unforgettable rendition of the Furies. **The Young People's Chorus, one of New York City's artistic treasures,** made the most of their brief appearance as the Eumenides.

The dancing was well choreographed, particularly in the Cassandra scene. The orchestra, athletically conducted by Steven Osgood, was sterling. Particular praise goes to percussion soloist David Schottzko, whose virtuoso performance was astounding.

Luca Veggetti, who served as director and choreographer, met and conquered the challenges of presenting this sprawling work in the confined space of the Miller Theater. His staging was elegant, fluid and never overstated.

One would be remiss not to make mention of the fact that this event also marks the departure of the Miller Theater's executive director, George Steel, whose innovative programming over the past eleven years has made the Miller Theater the most interesting venue in New York City. Steel began his tenure as general director of Dallas Opera on October 1. □

ARLO MCKINNON

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