

Madame Françoise Xenakis, in conversation with Andreas Waldburg-Wolfegg

Paris, France

March, 2009

Translated from the French by Maro Elliott

Andreas: It is, perhaps, very interesting to have a relationship with someone who is a veritable genius...

Mme: It troubled me, and everything that it entails: weakness, faults, instability... and genius

Andreas: Yes.

Mme: And you know, I knew people who took him for an idiot, in Paris.

Andreas: Really?

Mme: Oh yes. We were there three or four times—because we were close friends with Maurice Fleuret and he listened to what Maurice said. And at one point, you know, he was the music critic for *l'Observateur*, and he was a good guy, maudlin, a flamboyant homosexual. And he explained to Xenakis that one knows to accept certain dinner invitations, and people like that tried to talk to him, “you need to play politics...” It was a disaster because he acted ignorant. I heard people say “Xenakis, but he’s a bloody idiot” [laughter] I heard well. But he tried hard to make us believe him, eh? And he was an idiot then, because he wasn’t comfortable in his own skin, because he didn’t want to be there; he was unpleasant and deliberately obtuse. But he was very funny, for example when we were lost in the car, on the road, he hated to ask for directions and when he saw an idiot, an innocent, or a paraplegic, then he asked them. [laughter] I told him “But why are you going directly to the person who can’t help you?”

Andreas: When you were a young woman, what attracted you to him?

Mme: Oh, I can tell you the story, it’s very strange. It was in 1950, in winter, you’ve got to understand that because your mother made you learn French and now, etc. MY mother was schoolteacher and was remarkable with children, who obeyed her, and they became firemen, teachers, two of them were graduates of the ENA [Ecole nationale d’administration], etc, and me, it didn’t work on. I refused to take her orders. I refused. I ran away, yes, yes. And so she decided that I was a fool and needed to go to a trade school to learn how to make brassieres.

Andreas: Yes.

Mme: So finally she made me take an examination in order to be (??) at 17 years old. I flunked high school, I got myself expelled...I just didn’t want to do it. I wanted to do a distance-learning program in the countryside and she told me “you can’t do it that way, you can’t do it.” it wasn’t true, I should have done it. But she never believed me, so I didn’t, it was stupid, I didn’t do anything, I was in a total rebellion.

Andreas: Yes.

Mme: My mother made me take an exam to be a nurse; her dream was for me to enlist— there was the Vietnam war, I believe—and she wanted me to be a army nurse, so that I could marry a sergeant, and I told myself the nursing school was in Paris, so I got accepted to the nursing school there, and found myself in a building there I was afraid of Paris, I was a country girl and I held to that. And I had a neighbor who had accepted to go to dinner at the home of a Greek sculptor, and in 1950, the young girls were still a little afraid...you know?

Andreas: Ah yes.

Mme: Right? So all of a sudden I was asked to go to dinner at this man’s house, she knocked on my door and she said to me “listen, I accepted this invitation to dinner, but I’m afraid, come with me.” We had no connection. And why I said yes despite the fact that I always say no... I said yes. So she called the Greek sculptor and she told him “I’m bringing a friend.” And so he called Xenakis in a panic and said, very



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delicately, “I’ve nabbed a date a little [laughter] but she’s coming with a friend, come for dinner.” The house was a studio in the thirteenth *arrondissement*, it was like some kind of shed without heating where painters live. And in 1950, we were still eating very poorly in Paris. So we arrived, Xenakis wasn’t there, Xenakis was always late, always, always, always... When we took a plane on a Thursday towards the end of our life together I told him that it was on a Tuesday morning, so that we could miss the one on Tuesday, but make it on Friday! [laughter]. I did some math, and that’s how I got him to show up.

Andreas: Yes

Mme: Yes. He was, he was...But that’s how it is...sometimes I got very angry with him.

Andreas: Ah yes, yes, yes.

Mme: It’s very bothersome, you know. Especially because he didn’t restrain himself at all. I once watched him yelling at a taxi driver “go faster!” and the guy said to him “sir, get out of my cab; you should have left earlier!” [laughter] And I said, “this guy’s right; let’s go!” [laughter]. He was impossible!

Andreas: So...

Mme: So he showed up. And they had a lovely conversation in Greek in front of us. Xenakis said “there are a few guests,” so the other Greek said “well, I invited the blonde, but the little brunette—“ I was very dark, I had dark eyes... I was very Mediterranean, so for two Greeks...

Andreas: It was just what they wanted.

Mme: Exactly. And I had these two perfect little breasts, anyway... he the other guy said “well, the brunette’s not so bad,” but Xenakis said “hey, what about me? You were the one who invited the blonde...” Well it was more difficult than that, but anyway. And we ate canned beans with sausages, I think. And there was this dish or something in which there was an apple, maybe two apples, and a peach. And I got the feeling that Xenakis was looking at that peach. And the other guy, who wanted to pander to me, I guess, hands me the peach first. And I have no idea why, but I took the peach, I split it in two, and gave one half to Xenakis. He had been in France for two years, it was the first time someone had offered him anything. He was flabbergasted. And then he said “no, it was my glass eye that was looking at it.” [laughter]. He really had a dark sense of humor; yeah right, his glass eye. When we went to restaurants and there were a bunch of snobs who didn’t know about it, and he took his glass eye, with Le Corbusier, who also had a glass eye, and he read the menu with his glass eye, doing what he could.

Andreas: Yes

Mme: No, it was...

Andreas: It must have been a very difficult handicap

Mme: Very, very difficult. Especially because he was so handsome.

Andreas: Yes.

Mme: Yes he was in Athens during the civil war and *paff*, right in the face. For a long time in early photos of him, he is like this, then one day he moved his hand but... he was thirty years old.

Andreas: Yes there isn’t a single photo where one can see that side of his face. And for someone like him who was interested in space, he lost the—

Mme: He was a champion tennis player and he could never play again; and he drove badly. He was dangerous, he sideswiped cars, he couldn’t see...



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Andreas: It's for this reason that—

Mme: It always the others who drove badly, right? [laughter]. No I'm lucid, you know. And I speak the truth. They were all bad drivers. And he was very proud, he had heard this French phrase, about "how'd you get your driver's license??" so he yammered on about that.

Andreas: And he always had a very strong accent?

Mme: Yes, but Romanian. The Greeks made fun of him when he spoke Greek because he spoke Romanian Greek. And his grandmother, and the kids, there were 3 boys, and their mother died in childbirth with the fourth, who was a girl, and their father—they had a French nurse, a German one, and an English one, and every 8 days, they rotated the kids so that they would learn all of the languages. So they stammered until they were 15 but they kept studying them until they were 16. They were three totally disturbed kids. Me, I was less crazy.

Andreas: He was the oldest child?

Mme: Yes, he was the eldest.

Andreas: rather interesting.

Mme: and two of them killed themselves.

Andreas: really?

Mme: The mother was very very.... It was a strange marriage, you know, bourgeois: a Greek from Romania brought up by French nuns and the father got married when he was 40, but he kept his mistress, kept his lifestyle. He had children, but...

Andreas: ...but his wife lived her own life.

Mme: Well, she, she didn't have a life; she played the piano, she cried, she was always pregnant.

Andreas: Yes, and then she died.

Mme: Yes, she died pregnant.

Andreas: That's striking.

Mme: And when he was nine, he went to boarding school at Spetsai, that famous school, where the worst student was the son of a king. [laughter]

Andreas: Is that surprising?

Mme: no [laughter].

Andreas: So anyway you met him at this dinner?

Mme: Exactly. So he asked to see me again, and we took a lot of walks in Paris.

Andreas: So how did it work? Because there weren't phones, were there?

Mme: Oh yes, there were.



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Andreas: Oh there were?

Mme: Yes, and you would put coins in; sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. We called them taxi-phones.

Andreas: And that's how you would call one another?

Mme: Well, also we had *pneumatiques*; it was a letter you put in an envelope and there were these special mailboxes and they went through tubes to the closest post office and then a gentleman on a bike would deliver it. It went pretty fast, eh? A *pneumatique* sent at noon from somewhere got to you by 2 pm, 2.30. It was perfect. Everyone missed them when they were phased out.

Andreas: So you would write little notes to one another to say "tonight..."

Mme: Exactly. And it came to you all rolled up.

Andreas: So when you "went out," in quotes, you didn't really "go out," you visited people's houses.

Mme: Yes, we went over to see people, and he and I didn't have any money for the theatre—actually, we did go to see American Westerns. We would watch two, just like that, on Sunday afternoons...we were poor, very poor. He was never well-dressed...no, we were poor.

Andreas: And, as far as I understand, this period—

Mme: He lived in a furnished hotel room, where there were other emigrants. There were old white Russians next door, and the woman didn't speak a word of French, and her husband said it was because she had convinced herself that they were going to return to Russia. She died in Paris. There were deserters from Vietnam, from the Viet Cong, there were Poles, Russians...and many artists.

Andreas: And they all knew one another?

Mme: Yes, and also they did a lot of yelling, about politics. Many had fled communist states. And Xenakis wanted to believe that communism was for him. No for long, but he did believe it.

Andreas: Do you think he was, ultimately, an apolitical man?

Mme: At the end he was apolitical. But when he came here, no.

Andreas: He was an idealist, no?

Mme: Very much an idealist. He was convinced that communism was the way. He was a part of that generation.

Andreas: And were you interested in communism as well?

Mme: Oh yes, Aragon [commune in the south of France], and what was that painter who does those very... I was just this little girl in the French communist party. Oh yes, we had a lot in common. I lost faith in it much sooner than he did.

Andreas: It's interesting that you watched Westerns [laughter]...

Mme: I remember that he wanted to stay twice in a row because of Jack Palance—you're too young to remember—he was an American actor who was tremendously ugly and frightening, and he only played insufferable assholes, and he was in westerns where he would come out of nowhere with a machine gun and wipe out 60 Indians in one go, and at the end of the movie he was squashed up against a wall by a



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wagon of Red Skins. And Iannis said “I’ve got to see that again.” So we watched the whole thing again! He was so childlike...and it made me absolutely crazy to see that sort of thing.

Andreas: So this was the time when he was working with Le Corbusier.

Mme: Yes.

Andreas: It was a tough job, no?

Mme: It was enormously tough, a tremendous amount of work. He became an architect because he saw them drawing and doing calculations, and he hated that, but he had to get by. And so when an architect would say “no, this won’t hold, your thing is going to fall” and he would say “you’ve got to do this, and this, and this, and it’ll hold.” And Corbu let him do it a couple of times and then all of a sudden he said “why aren’t you an architect?” and he told him “because I went to Polytechnique [School of Science and Technology] and I’m an engineer, and you’ve hired me to do math, but I’m not all that interested by it.” It was a big honor, and he ended up liking it. They got along and they fought, and they had a lot in common, a lot.

Andreas: You wrote in your book that—

Mme: Wow you’ve really been reading! [laughter] ...

Andreas: No, but he helps you in another way.

Mme: Yes, he helps me. He gives me a lot.

Andreas: How old is he?

Mme: Four years old. But I took him... ? He runs into the street, he’s made me fall two, three times... he’s a little nutcase.

Andreas: They’ve got such an energy—

Mme: I only like the dogs that do.

Andreas: Have you had many Jack Russels?

Mme: Always. Or foxes. They’re headstrong; I love it. I get angry when they make me crazy, but I love it. [laughter]. I don’t like ...?

Andreas: Yes, those little dogs are practical, too.

Mme: When we took the train, he was just in a bag, just like that. When I fly, he’s on my knees in a little bag. But I’ve had to put him on a diet because he’s almost 5 kilos, so when we fly he’s at the limit

Andreas: So he can’t weigh anymore?

Mme: No; otherwise, it’s in the hold. And he would be traumatized.

Andreas: Right, so there’s only the less traumatic option. [laughter]

Mme: He yells!

Andreas: But don’t we all, on airplanes!



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Mme: Absolutely; it's no fun.

Andreas: But what I find fascinating is—

Mme: In *Regarde, nos chemins sont fermes*. Did you read *Non, j'aime pas la mer*?

Andreas: No, I've only read excerpts that are in—

Mme: I'll give it to you.

Andreas: I would love to read it! Thank you.

Mme: These were our vacations. It's all true. And there are some things that I didn't include because we would have had the law breathing down our necks. [laughter]. And with a 3 month old baby, the stuff we did...they would have taken the kid away. And I consented because I felt that he would turn out less crazy if he was there. Maybe it was a mistake on my part.

Andreas: But what's interesting is that, knowing you very little...it's still very interesting to read stories as personal as these—

Mme: Yes, I am a little... some people resent me for it.

Andreas: It must also be very interesting to do it because—

Mme: He was a man outside of the norm.

Andreas: Oh yes. And I had the impression that you completed him entirely. You were his other half.

Mme: We were very—we had some real crises. Iannis really liked this one young lady; he found it relaxing to be with her. There was some kind of gentleman's agreement that when the other woman was rude to me, I would ask her to—

Andreas: ...to get lost.

Mme: It bothered me a little, but he did it. And there were a few times where I wrote break-up letters. And he would say to me, 'isn't that a little mean? Do you want to separate or not?' [laughter] That's the revenge of the old wife, isn't it?

Andreas: Yes, it's very interesting because you have written something in your book that I read about humor, and how your weapon has always been humor because—

Mme: Always, since I was very young.

Andreas: And he had almost none.

Mme: He didn't have any at all. But he understood mine. And when I told him things, I translated what I had to say into humor. But the worst things, the hardest things sometimes... And I hung on to the habit and I disarmed some people with my manner of speaking. They told me I was harsh. I really am, I think. And it's true that I'm not very careful with jerks, or at least, people who act like jerks.

Andreas: Like those firemen you were describing before.

Mme: But it's true, those idiots.

Andreas: It was here in this apartment?



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Mme: It was here. He died in my bedroom, because he often slept there.

Andreas: Yes. You've also written that it was he who finally pushed you to write.

Mme: The typewriter often wouldn't print the "e" and the "o." And so I went [imitates typewriter noise] and he would ask 'is it coming along?' and I would say 'oh yes it's coming along.' And I was very annoyed, because I couldn't get it to write anything. I was very illiterate. I knew that to express beauty, sexual desire, I had to interest him in other ways, too. And I said to myself 'he won't have any respect for me...' So I started writing. And he would say...but he knew that I wasn't really writing anything because when I was off sleeping like a baby, he went and poked around and he said to himself 'if I read something of hers, she'll say that she can't go on and she'll stop.' So he knew that I wasn't up to anything but he didn't say anything. Finally he admitted it to me, and so I ended up finishing the first book. Yes, there were many situations where one of us really held up the other, just like that, without...we were the greatest of friends.

Andreas: Did he push you?

Mme: Yes. Otherwise, I would have just been this vacuous thing.

Andreas: Yes, there's also a very lovely part of your book where you described that between you and him there was always a kind of—

Mme: [unintelligible]

Andreas: Yes.

Mme: Presenting one another with something complete.

Andreas: 'Impress me,' 'surprise me.'

Mme: Impress; exactly. It wasn't 'surprise me,' it was 'impress me.' At a dress rehearsal, since he wasn't particularly interested in the performances, he said to a conductor 'do I have to go tonight?' and the guy said to him, "Iannis?! Yes!" And he said, "I really liked what I saw at the rehearsal, so my work is done." He was being sincere; he wasn't fooling around. He would much rather have stayed home and watched a movie on television.

Andreas: Yes it seems to me that he was—he was criticized for being awkward but his awkwardness was just a form of frankness.

Mme: He was frank. Frank, and not super nice. When he thought someone was an ass, he said, "You're an ass." In good Greek, he would yell at people. And with cars...a sock in the face just because I guy cut in front of him. [laughter]. I was horrified.

Andreas: I imagine!

Mme: I was horrified. I said to him, "Do you want me to bring you a turd?" [laughter]. And why? Well I said to him 'because where I'm from, you hit people only once you've farted yourself to death.' And he said 'oh, not where I'm from. When someone cuts in front of me, I hit them.'

Andreas: Fascinating.

Mme: No, he was violent. He had pent-up aggression.

Andreas: Did you discuss his ideas about music?



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Mme: He spoke to me about it. But I didn't have enough of a grasp of the abstract. I'm a country woman. And it reassured him to talk to me in country. Because I said to him 'I don't understand. I don't understand what you're telling me. I don't understand, it's too abstract.' So he tried and...he made me crazy when he pulled out a blackboard and wrote out equations and said 'here, this is what music is.' And I would yell at him and say 'no one understands you, Iannis.' And he said 'you don't understand because you're dumb.' The rest of the world is often just as dumb as I am.

Andreas: What fascinated me, who is neither musician nor architect, but has nevertheless a kind of interest—

Mme: What's your job?

Andreas: I'm an investor. The only one who's still got a job.

Mme: You're the only one making money. [laughter]

Andreas: Only a little! We'll see where it goes, but for now—

Mme: What a beating, eh?

Andreas: Yes.

Mme: But did you know that bankers were so dishonest? Because you've got to admit it's a pretty enormous crisis of dishonesty that has ruined us, or have I misunderstood?

Andreas: I think that—

Mme: that everyone dared to push it too far.

Andreas: Yes. And today there are politicians who say that it's entirely the fault of the bankers, but I think that they were all tied up in—

Mme: in making more and more.

Andreas: Yes.

Mme: And the stock options, they're a shamelessly deceitful. You've probably all done them.

Andreas: No, I haven't. Not personally. But there is basically a network of mechanisms that I think are—

Mme: Just fine.

Andreas: Just fine, but were abused.

Mme: But there are a lot of dishonest people who cheated.

Andreas: Yes.

Mme: People are getting clever. I've known people who went to the Polytechnique school, but who were just so ambitious that...they were awarded a gold medal to go to New York in these businesses. They were complete idiots.

Andreas: But they knew how to make good business models and —



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Mme: Yes. But they couldn't have taken care of themselves. Their mothers were behind the whole operation, so when I heard that they'd gotten a good job, I never understood. Because I'm such a country bumpkin. But they knew what to do, I guess.

Andreas: Yes, they knew how to—

Mme: To play the game.

Andreas: Some played the game and some— there are obviously also some things that we don't understand or understand badly, like many innovations across all kinds of sectors, we—

Mme: Found everything, but didn't think enough?

Andreas: Didn't think enough, and those who thought about it didn't explain themselves or they explanations were misunderstood and—

Mme: And how did we let Madoff get by for thirty years?

Andreas: Yes, it's rather striking.

Mme: And there were accountants, there were expert accountants... someone objected and sent out a statement every year about Madoff; no one budged. He was soaking the whole world, by the end.

Andreas: And it's then that I tell myself that it wasn't only the banks, because there were people in government—

Mme: He had everyone; it wouldn't have been possible otherwise. Money is a monster.

Andreas: Naturally, the conclusion is that it's too abstract.

Mme: Money? Absolutely.

Andreas: Yes.

Mme: It's what I always told Iannis. I remembered we bought a country home for our children and we were in the car and the deal was finished, and our agent, David, said "honestly, Iannis, let me tell you that you paid too much for that house." And Iannis looked at him and said, "but David, it's only money." David never got over it. [laughter]. Now this guy is a medical professor who loves money. Once in a while he'll say to me "It's only money"— he never forgot it; he never will.

Andreas: A person like your husband, much more than myself, for example, who's 40 years younger than he was, was still forced to live with no money for a long time.

Mme: But we survived without money. You know, after the war, we went to the public baths every 8 days.

Andreas: Right, les Baines-Douche.

Mme: Yes, that's it. There was only cold water, and Iannis would put a milk jug filled with the water— because the faucet wouldn't just flow out; you had to press on it to keep the water coming. So he would put a milk jug like this so that it would keep the pressure on and let the water flow out non-stop. And we went every Saturday morning to the public baths and I remember the runoff, with hair, and soap... we were so dirty and smelly. And we only had a small gas heater.

Andreas: And there were toilets in the halls, right?



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Mme: Absolutely, absolutely. And we would eat these French fries—there was this war widow, she had a medallion of her husband around her neck and every time that she brought home some horsemeat sausages that she knew we liked, the fatty kind, she would cook them up and the medallion of her husband would be dunked into the frying oil. We went there every day for lunch, it amused us so much. [laughter]. To see him dipped in like that!

Andreas: A true slice of humanity.

Mme: Indeed.

Andreas: Very nice. Yes, and it's for that reason why I was saying—

Mme: But you, you survived much less poor than we were.

Andreas: Yes.

Mme: How old are you?

Andreas: I'm 43 years old.

Mme: You're a baby.

Andreas: Quite.

Mme: It's good!

Andreas: Yes. It interests me that you said that, in fact, Xenakis stayed a little kid until the end.

Mme: Just about. Two years before dying he told me “You know, Franchette, I've thought about it and I don't think I'm going to get any better. And I said “What makes you say that?” [laughter]. He was dying, but he didn't really see it. He never asked what he had.

Andreas: It's difficult—

Mme: Yes, it is difficult.

Andreas: And it's so well described in your book that, in fact, for someone who was so intellectual, it was the best ways to be ill.

Mme: Yes, to be a burden. You know, when he closed the door to his studio [...] he is the one who withdrew. And afterwards, it was his body...he stopped interacting.

Andreas: So this studio—

Mme: It's there. It's two streets away.

Andreas: And he kept it for how long?

Mme: It's still there; I still have it. I'm keeping it for my grandson.

Andreas: And he worked for how many—

Mme: I bought it before we even had a house. It was the first thing that I bought, in 1972. We began, he began, because I started later. I earned the money from my books, but much later. We began.... '70.



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Andreas: And so it was you who bought the studio. Did you share it?

Mme: No, no. We rented this little apartment and we lived in it, but he dreamed of having a place for himself. And I remember I had this red raincoat that went down to here and a decent seller had made an appointment with me, and walking down the street I see this guy with a grubby face on the opposite sidewalk, and he saw me too, looking like a little girl, with my hair up to here, and he said to himself “that can’t be her...” And after a minute he approached me and said “are you the one?” and I said “yes, that’s me.” And then I said, “you’re late.” [laughter]. And he said “no, I’ve been here! I thought that it could never be you.” [laughter]. I wasn’t wearing an ounce of makeup. Anyway, we went in to the building and I saw the entrance and it had this thing and I said to him “I think I’ll take it.” And he said “listen, young lady, that’s not how it’s done.” And so I went into the main room, it was an old tailor’s workshop, and I said “I’ll take it.” And there, too, the notary told me that I’d paid too much for it. [laughter].

Andreas: So Xenakis went there on his own.

Mme: All on his own. It was when he had stopped working with Le Corbusier. He was crunching the numbers and saying “how much will we need to get through the month?” Because I worked, I worked my entire life, I was a social worker in a center for delinquents. I hated it, but I...I was very much a child myself... I was a bit of a delinquent. We always tend towards what we are. That’s why, with cops and robbers, you’ve got to look closely at their outfits. [laughter] Not much of a difference between them.

Andreas: Yes. And you were in that line of work for how long?

Mme: Oh, I worked there from 1952 to... 1974-5.

Andreas: Oh really? So you were working in a prison, then?

Mme: In a reform centers for delinquent youths. They were frightening, they were and still are.

Andreas: So you were in fact making money during this period.

Mme: Yes, yes. And [Xenakis] was too, with Le Corbusier, but they were very small salaries you know, and the rents were shockingly expensive. We had nothing, nothing, nothing, we had... no parents to help us, my mother... absolutely nothing.

Andreas: SO the first thing that you bought was the studio rather than the apartment?

Mme: Yes. He so badly needed a space.

Andreas: And that’s where he worked on his own?

Mme: Yes, all alone. He would leave in the morning and come home at night. He would call once or twice during the day.

Andreas: But he didn’t work in the middle of the night or—

Mme: When he had a piece to finish, sometimes. He called it ‘being a workaholic,’ like all the architects. [laughter] He was being a workaholic. But he didn’t like it, no. No, he worked during the day...and so he resented people who ate lunch, saying that it was a huge waste of time. But I found tons of peanuts and chocolate in his studio. [...] And he would go down to the newsstand, because I asked them and he said, “Madame, he was buying fatty milk chocolates...the worst!”

Andreas: So he had a sort of separation between his family life and—

Mme: Totally, totally. At home he did noting. He had nothing.



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Andreas: Did he read?

Mme: Yes, he read mathematical books and English detective novels. Yes and when he was doing tragedies he plunged back into classical texts... he scanned, he was happy when he—

Andreas: And he knew how to speak classical Greek as well?

Mme: Yes, obviously. Very, very well.

Andreas: Yes, he would have been taught in school.

Mme: Yes, it was taught to him. He knew how to scan... I have all of his books, Seneca, Plato...

Andreas: Ah yes, with the—

Mme: All of the correct little things on the accents.

Andreas: Me, I learned that in Latin.

Mme: I learned it in Latin too, but very little. Now, something that really interested me in high school was old French. And I knew *Pelleas and Melissande*... wait no, what was it called that love story, with the potion...

Andreas: No...

Mme: *Pelleas and Melissande*... oh! They died by drinking this poison—

Andreas: Of course, what's it called—Romeo and Juliet.

Mme: No! It's Greek...

Andreas: Oh la la!

Mme: This is terrible.

Andreas: Yes, it's terrible.

Mme: You're only 42, me, I'm [laughter; unintelligible]

Andreas: And me, I'm only lucky that my old Greek professor isn't here.

Mme: And I knew it by heart in old French. And this *Pelleas*—and when I've got the wrong name, it won't budge.

Andreas: Yes, yes.

Mme: I'll remember it once you've gone. *Daphne and Chloe*, certainly it's not that.

Andreas: No.

Mme: Oh I wouldn't be able to stand it if I couldn't come up with it. There's a dwarf or a gnome.

Andreas: In the story?



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Mme: Yes, yes, who gives the potion.

Andreas: Yes, yes, yes.

Mme: It's his aunt's hand... It's the story of *Pelleas and Melissande*, in the end, all the dramas about infidelity are the same. But it was because there was a potion.

Andreas: Was he fascinated by infidelity? Because he took part in it?

Mme: It wasn't infidelity. It was nothing. In the beginning, I won't lie, I was very upset. I didn't understand, because I'm not like that. And he would say "Francette, it's nothing." And I would say, "Well it works out nicely for her." [laughter]. And he would say "Forget about her." [laughter]. He was rather cynical. With me, there was no forget-about-it. I'd say, "How can you?" and he would say, "Oh very easily."

Andreas: It's fascinating.

Mme: I think it's quite common amongst men.

Andreas: Yes. I suppose that it's also—

Mme: He gave so much to me. One day, I don't know, I was fed up, and one of [the girls] had called me up out of sorts. And I said to him "Listen, Iannis, it's very simple. We'll get a divorce." And he said "are you serious?" and I said, "I couldn't be more serious." And he said, "But I don't want to get divorced," and I said, "But I do. I don't want this life anymore." You know what he said to me, forgive me, I'm saying this because I've started to say it... Shortly before his death, he told me that I had been too easy on him. I thought that was pretty rich.

Andreas: Yes, I imagine.

Mme: I don't know how he would have taken it if I had said something like that to him. I don't know. [...] I fear that he never understood how it pained me. He wanted me to tell me that I had let him be too loose. Maybe, but he wouldn't have tolerated restraint.

Andreas: Yes, he would have been the one bothered to no end, no?

Mme: Yes, of course, of course. And we had built something... we were complementary. That is indisputable.

Andreas: When did you start writing?

Mme: When I was 24 or 25. I finished my first book at 24. I've written 27. I'm tired. I can't finish any more, I have one in the work but...I'm terrible. I have to stop, I think.

Andreas: Yes, or change location.

Mme: Yes. I can't do it anymore.

Andreas: So where you wrote about your vacations, in your book *Moi j'aime pas a la mer*, you visited these islands—

Mme: Well, they were Greek islands... it turned out to be a very bad present to me...there had been problems with passports.

Andreas: When did the border open?



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Mme: Well, it was two years after the coup, because there were two colonels on board, and at first we were told, “come and turn yourself in, and we’ll hold two trials for you, since there have been two convictions, and we’ll acquit you.” And he said “do you take me for a fool? [laughter] Are you out of your minds! I’ll come when I’ve been acquitted; you’ve held trials without my knowledge! Why should I even show up?” So after about 2 years, a lawyer basically came in and took care of it. And there was something else that was quite nice that no one knows about: that Pompidou made him a French citizen. He had lived with stateless papers; you had a to have a visa to go to Switzerland...it was very complicated. The border authorities thought he was some kind of criminal. And he would address them informally, and it would put them in a right state.

Andreas: And with that accent, too, no?

Mme: Yes. He was a foreigner. And he was publicly searched; he was always being humiliated because of his foreignness. In the metro, people were not accustomed to a damaged face, and I got looks from the women. The women were monstrous. I would get looks until I turned him around. With the desire to punch them all out. Anyway, what was it I was telling you?

Andreas: Yes we were talking about vacations.

Mme: Ah yes, the passport. So, Pompidou made him a Frenchman. A huge relief. And then—

Andreas: He was already well-known?

Mme: Yes, yes. Pompidou was a fan of Xenakis from the beginning. He went to all the concerts; he was a true amateur of contemporary music. It wasn’t out of snobbishness, it wasn’t... we had been invited by Giscard. So he was pardoned, and immediately there was a phone call from the Greek embassy, and the ambassador to Greece wanted to offer a Greek passport to both of us. I couldn’t believe it; we hadn’t been married by an orthodox priest. We were invited to come fetch it, but Xenakis said “no, I won’t come to get it.” So he was delivered a Greek passport. And when he finally returned to Greece after 28 years in exile, we were with Maurice Fleuret, and when we left, I saw that he took both the French and Greek passports. And the whole way there, I saw that there was an impending crisis. So we disembarked into this crowd, etcetera, and the madman takes out his French passport. And a Greek man was there to receive him and said, “Xenakis, we gave you a Greek passport.” And he said “yes, but when you had taken it back and stripped me of my Greek nationality, there were a whole lot less people.” He was devoted to his new passport; he never lost sight of it. It left a huge impression on him to have been stripped of his nationality; he never said it, but it was a sufferance, to have it taken away.

Andreas: Yes, especially for that generation, that region.

Mme: Yes absolutely.

Andreas: Because today, we all think of ourselves as European.

Mme: Yes, we’re unconcerned. As a little girl, I was very attached; I was raised to respect the tricolor flag, the 11th of November, all the speeches, the songs. I think at the end of it we swore to die before General Petain. I went like this [mumbles sarcastically; laughter]. I didn’t want do die for that old fool!

Andreas: Yes, I’m sure it must have been difficult just to be Greek.

Mme: Yes, and he was ancient Greek.

Andreas: On top of everything.



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Mme: On top. And Greeks didn't like him. There was a scandal when he came back to Greece. A journalist asked him "so how do you find the Greeks?" [And he replied]: "fat." [laughter]. They were ridiculous to him. And fat.

Andreas: Fat! And he loved the sea, unlike you!

Mme: It's true; I loathe it. It scares me.

Andreas: So he always dragged you there.

Mme: Always. I never wanted to; 40 years! [laughter]. And now I take morphine every day for my hands, because they're so beat up. Thank you, Xenakis. Because we went rowing, and with rowing, you're always pulling the same weight, and I would sit in the front, with the wind hitting me head-on. I destroyed myself, my bones, with the boats. My whole nervous system was damaged. I should get a pension for it. [laughter]. Sometimes, when I would do something obnoxious, I would say "shit; that's my pension." [laughter].

Andreas: Where did his passion for the sea come from?

Mme: From the classical world. And he was a sublime swimmer. Spetsai was on the shore. He was a great athlete, Xenakis, while he had both his eyes. Jumping, running, tennis, swimming. He was a champion swimmer in college. He had an amazing crawl. Me, I can only doggy-paddle, because I'm so scared. But I get pretty far that way! [laughter].

Andreas: After 40 years!

Mme: But if you take away my paddles, I'll drown! [laughter]. I don't know how to swim; no one believes me, but it's true. It's a disaster. I figure it out, it's true. When you fall out of a boat, you've got to figure it out.

Andreas: And so you fell out a lot, didn't you? Because they were small boats.

Mme: Oh yes. They were these little German boats, because those were the best; they were kayaks, which basically means canvas and rubber; it's based on the little Indian boats. Very, very narrow, and when I got heavier... You would sit on this little seat like this, so that you've got your butt right under your back because you're so crammed in. We were packed like jam into jars, and getting unpacked was a disaster!

Andreas: And you went out—

Mme: We went out into the open sea; we weren't messing around. Of course we had no sunglasses, no nothing.

Andreas: And with [your daughter] Makhi?

Mme: With Makhi and a dog. We had made him a little hole because he was a fox-terrier, and he had this very long neck and no tail. And the guy who made the boat for us, he got it patented in Israel, because Israeli soldiers would put their machine guns in the hole that had been designed for the dog. It was a boat designed by Iannis. And the guy sold it to Israel. I wrote him a letter saying that I wasn't interested in money, but that I found it rather unrefined, that the hole meant to fasten my dog's neck was being used to kill Palestinians.

Andreas: And how long did these boats last?

Mme: 5, 6 years. Unless we shredded it against the rocks.

Andreas: Which happened, I imagine.



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Mme: It happened once, and we shattered it all over the place. The tide had carried us over to a shore where there was this rock. I say a rock but I mean a boulder, you know. We really fell on our faces...and he was saying that we had to jump into the water, because otherwise, with the boat, we'd get hurt. And so that's when we rolled and fell, and with the baby only this big. He said "we can't get to shore in the boat; we have to jump in and push it." And he was right, but it was almost impossible. And I was panicking a little, but I kept my mouth shut. I never made a sound. But he was pushing and pulling so hard I saw his bones taugt. I was hitting him with a piece of wood. [laughter]. You know, the way you tenderize meat.

Andreas: Yes exactly!

Mme: And it gave me a lot of satisfaction!

Andreas: Yes I'm sure [...] What's fascinating is that he was entirely both man and composer.

Mme: Yes. And child. He was an overgrown child.

Andreas: Did Makhi take to the water more than you did?

Mme: Oh yes she loved it. And she's a wonderful swimmer. She would go off into the waves with her father when she was 12, 13, 14 years old. And me, I was the old lady getting in the way.

Andreas: How did having a child affect him?

Mme: He was very, very moved. I'm glad he never had a son, because he would have driven him crazy. She says that he frustrated her, wanting her to be a mathematician. She resented his ego, but she understands that he loved her passionately.

Andreas: Did having a child change him?

Mme: In terms of responsibility, no, not at all. I think he wanted the child for me. For me to live. Because I appear to be the kind of person who lives and breathes the pleasure of life. But I wasn't a very carefree woman who loved life. And I think he said to himself, "now she has a responsibility."

Andreas: How did Makhi get involved in painting and sculpture?

Mme: Hold on, I'll show you something. I'm going to show you something she made when she was 6 years old...do you know that she has sold her series on the madwomen, you the know the women—

Andreas: oh yes, in fact I saw that.

Mme: She sold it all to the Fondation Guerlain, which means it's going to be on display in Napoleon's park. Look, she made this when she was 6.

Andreas: It's great.

Mme: Isn't it? She spent her life drawing...there was an old lady who lived nearby when we lived in that small apartment, and she repaired art objects. And she had all this...Makhi really learned to use her hands there. And so she started architecture school and Iannis told her, don't bother, we'll help you out.

Andreas: Yes and he was so abstract and sculpture is so concrete, wouldn't you say?

Mme: Well I was upset at Iannis because I wanted her to have a job. [...] He said that, no, he preferred to give her an allowance rather than have her take a job she hated, the way he did when he was doing calculations years before. It was a great source of conflict [...] And I'm still not completely in agreement.



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Andreas: And how did you experience this period—because you are around my mother’s age.

Mme: I’m 78.

Andreas: Okay, so you’re younger than my mother is.

Mme: Younger? She had you quite late then?

Andreas: No I’m the youngest of 6. [...]

Mme: Are they all still alive?

Andreas: All of them. My parents passed away, but my brothers and sisters are still here.

Mme: And do you like them?

Andreas: Yes, a lot.

Mme: You’re lucky.

Andreas: Oh yes. [...]

X : Oh that’s wonderful. Because the three Xenakis sons hated one another. Or rather, Iannis wasn’t jealous of the others, but the others hated him. Apparently he was his mother’s favorite—not for long, because he was 5 when she died; it didn’t last long.

A : And the third son—what was his name again ? The second was called Jason, no?

X : No the third one was Jason. The second one was Cosmas.

A : Ah yes, Cosmas.

X : Bad painter, bad architect.

A : That’s probably where it comes from—

Mme: The jealousy; absolutely. And the second brother was a philosopher. He was never jealous but he was insane. He was in a car accident in a little red Cabriolet, in the Americas, and he went under a truck. He had almost the exact same scar as Iannis.

Andreas: Right. So what I was going to ask you was, for you, the era of women’s liberation must have been interesting for you, with a husband who, I fear, didn’t believe in it much. Or it never occurred to him.

Mme: No it never did. He wanted women to be able to work, to have a job. But he also wanted to eat. And to be able to find a clean shirt every morning. [laughter]. He just wanted them to start the night before! No he was a man, and everything that that entails.

Andreas: And so you, how did you experience this period when everyone—the 60s, when everyone said that you had to let yourself go.

Mme: Well I let myself go in my writing. And I got into journalism in 1970. Claude Prerdriel was the director, the boss, of the *Observateur*, and a bunch of other things too. He always liked it when I told him about films I had seen. We saw a lot of one another; his sister was a pianist, Marie-Francoise Bucquet, and so we saw a lot of one another. And he would laugh himself to tears when I described movies to him. And



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he would go see them and he'd say "I didn't see any of that." [laughter]. And he started a newspaper, *Matin-Paris*, and he told me "I'd like you to cover the books." It made me sick to my stomach, I was shaking, I thought I'd never be able to do it, that I'd never be able to handle it...his driver had to come get my first article from me because I didn't want to turn it in...anyway you get the idea. But it worked out, and in July, when the whole staff of the culture division went off on vacation and there was no one left to run the division, He said to me "do you want to run it?" And I said "Well, hang on a second, I...Iannis is going to want to Corsica; settle it out with him." And that madman gave up his vacation because Claude Perdriel asked him to.

Andreas: I don't believe it.

Mme: It's true. I couldn't say no! I became the head of the culture division because he said—I wrote him a note when everyone had come back to say "these have been the best months of my life" and I thought that we were going to go back to me submitting an article three times a week like before, but he said to me "you're not going anywhere. You're the head of the division." And I tortured myself there for 11 years; I loved it. But I let everyone take over my duties all the time; I'm not a professional-minded. I remember Perdriel took me aside to say "you keep sawing off the branch you're sitting on." And I said "because I could care less about the branch." I'm not a workaholic at all. And he would say it again and again, that I could have become something else...but I didn't want to. I held to my place with Iannis. I didn't want anything more. We had built something that was a little lopsided in places, but it was something real.

Andreas: It fascinates me, speaking of construction, is that, when you look at this period, this period of Xenakis' work, and you look at what he was doing as an architect and a musician, composer, someone like me thinks—it's something that I, personally, adore, that I find very interesting—but it's not very popular. And I wonder how he lived with that.

Mme: He wasn't preoccupied by it. I don't know if he thought about it; it wasn't his problem. He had this expression—"it's not my problem"—which shook a lot of things off. When he felt overstepped, he just say, "It's not my problem." His problem was creating, seeking, finding the unbeaten path. The rest...he never said "I don't have time," but he would say "I'm not interested."

Andreas: So he had moments, I imagine, if I've understood correctly, when there was a lot of distance between him and his fellow composers.

Mme: He was hated. He was subverting...and then he met Boulez at Louis Saguere's, who was an old homosexual, delicious, but a bad composer. And he had put together this kind of salon where all the emerging composers came to see him. And Boulez was there—it was already a musical atmosphere, and he was already a conductor, and Boulez had a group of people who were exceptionally eloquent, and he is a man of striking intelligence. But Boulez hated Xenakis so much that he would speak out against him violently and in public. For him, Xenakis was something terrifying. That a man who was nothing, who only had a half a face, who was a communist...that was untenable for him—even though he thought highly of him. But it never went away. They crossed swords. He would say that Xenakis was telling architects that he was a composer and composers that he was an architect. It wasn't like that. He was dishonest.

Andreas: But what strikes me in looking at these things, these musicians, is that he really remained an emigrant in perpetuity.

Mme: In perpetuity. [...] He was a permanent emigrant. [unintelligible]

Andreas: It's interesting because it's very much like the history of classical music of the 20th century. It's a kind of emigration until 1985, I think; all the composers—

Mme: They all came from abroad. Bartók, Schoenberg...they were in exile. But most of them, in literature as well, they were politically right-leaning. The reds...



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Andreas: There were fewer of them.

Mme: There were few and they weren't seen well. Communism was scary at that time.

Andreas: And there was also, if I understand correctly, a whole political aspect to his composing, naturally.

Mme: Of course, it's very political.

Andreas: Yes, all these institutions like Darmstadt and Ircam, all that is—

Mme: Absolutely. And Pompidou—we dined with Blaise at Pompidou's 3 or 4 times—and he would say to them, you've got to get along, you both have—and Xenakis at first had to work at Ircam, and after 3 days he wrote, I cannot go on; Blaise is taking over. And Pompidou said "you're not trying hard enough." And Iannis said "I don't have time for this."

Andreas: It's pretty unbelievable that the president was involved in this at all.

Mme: And his failure to bring them together was saddening. He thought it was really too bad.

Andreas: Did Xenakis have students?

Mme: Not to whom he proper real lessons, but he did teach, and someone like the one who has become so successful—Dusapin—he learned everything from Xenakis. But he followed his own path; he's getting very lyrical now, doing operas. But he's a good composer. The Pole, Trenni—he's just an imitation, pure and simple.

Andreas: Did that bother him?

Mme: A lot. He found it very serious and unjust, and that no one seemed to care made him sick. No, it really wasn't classy. He would get very upset.

Andreas: I was always under the impression that he was an atheist.

Mme: He is.

Andreas: So I found it very interesting this correspondence he had with the father from La Tourette.

Mme: It's strange, isn't it?

Andreas: Yes; since he's from the orthodox tradition.

Mme: Yes, I also find it strange. And I saw him in Romania—we went back to Romania, and he said to me, you were wrong to make me come back, I'm having a difficult time. I thought that he ought to see his family home again. First of all, it was tiny; these things are never the way we saw them as children. And on top of it, there was a new family living there, and they thought that Xenakis was coming to reclaim the house. So they had locked everything up. And then a priest came by, because this other had been very observant, and he came and asked for money from Iannis. And Iannis was a brute. Uselessly, because he could have just said no. I said, why are you treating this man so disrespectfully? Who lives this sanitized life; it's proper for a priest to ask for a kilo of sugar. It's his job. Why did you humiliate him? And he said to me, "I can't stand it." And I said, "you're a asshole." [laughter]

Andreas: It wasn't the first time nor the last!



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Mme: One time he was preposterous; I don't know why I'm telling you, but I am—we often exchanged harsh words; why so often? Who knows. One day, I was nagging him and he said to me “do you know who you are talking to?” Oh yes, I said: “an asshole.” And he burst out laughing. [laughter]. Then it was over. I didn't say anything more and we moved on to other matters. I couldn't stand it that he'd asked me “do you know who you are talking to?”

Andreas: That's an unbelievable story.

Mme: Once in his life he said that to me! [laughter]. And all the while, I play nice. I'm a tough cookie, I don't put up with crap like that. And I'm willing to wipe out anyone who tries. I can't stand vanity; I find it an absurd human stupidity.

Andreas: But he wasn't at all vain.

Mme: No, not at all. Maybe deep down he had something—to get by, he may have carved something out. I think at a certain level he knew what he was worth, but he was full of doubt. At dress rehearsals he would look at me, and we had a code; I would go like this [gestures] or like this [gestures]. Sometimes I went like this [gestures]. There were works of his that...I just don't like; works for few instruments. I find them really tough, and willingly unpleasant. No I don't like all of it.

Andreas: That makes sense.

Mme: It's only fair. I really love his works for full orchestras. They inundate me, they penetrate me.

Andreas: Yes of course. He worked with orchestras?

Mme: Yes, a lot. He loved it. He was very good friend with Sherschoene, who was an odious man.

Andreas: You know him, obviously.

Mme: Yes, very well. A very amusing little fellow. I was left to myself and I was maybe 21, 22 years old, still childless, and Sherschoene practiced free love a lot. He was married to a young lady. But he said to Xenakis “will you lend me your wife?” and Xenakis said “no.” [laughter]. No! And he was all for it—I have no idea how it was supposed to happen—but Xenakis said “no.” [laughter]. It happened a lot amongst the intellectuals. I think things have straightened out, no? I don't really know. This whole sexual liberty thing has ended, no? I don't know.

Andreas: I don't know either, I'm not from that generation. [...] So I image it's as you say, that he wasn't vain, but that he was still sure of himself.

Mme: With huge doubts, but yes. When he found something, he knew that it was really something else. But he still had a nice little saying, almost childlike. He would assemble a creation and he would say “and what if they notice that there's nothing to it?” And if there's nothing to it? So, sometimes, when we'd go to concerts, I'd say “you see that? That's nothing. What we've just listened to.” And he would say “but you're hearing music, aren't you?” [laughter] I heard it; I'm not musician, but I know how to listen to music. I'm even a little bit dangerous. I've heard so much bad music, oh! Oh the bad contemporary music!

Andreas: Oh yes...no it's not very elegant. [...]

Mme: Oh it's so pretentious! Well there you go.

Andreas: Well very well then.

