

Stravinsky: last words on Stockhausen

An exchange of letters with Robert Craft

ROBIN MACONIE

I ... need to go from a beginning to an end through related parts. Perhaps in sympathy with the body's diminished mobility, the mind no longer seems to be willing or able to jump from isolated 'present' moments to other isolated 'present' moments.¹ I have been listening this week to the recorded piano music of a composer now widely esteemed for his ability to stay an hour or so ahead of his time.² But I find the alternation of note-clumps and silences of which it consists impossibly monotonous, and I long for the leverage of Beethoven's timing, to say nothing of harmonic and other leverages. The *matter* of the music is so limited in effect, too, and so solemn, that I was sustained only by the hope, during each longer silence,³ that finally the pianist might have 'had it' too and shot himself.

(Igor Stravinsky, 'Side Effects II', February 1, 1968. An interview for the *New York Review of Books*. Reprinted in *Retrospectives and Conclusions*, New York: Knopf, 1969, 68–84; UK edition *Themes and Conclusions*. London: Faber and Faber, 1972, 134–35.)

Piqued by the composer's expressions of weary impatience with Stockhausen, a composer in whose ideas of time control he had previously maintained a lively interest, I wrote to Robert Craft to ask his opinion of what I believed to be indications of approval by citation and imitation of one or two previously unmentioned Stockhausen traits. In earlier conversations recorded by Craft, Stravinsky had spoken admiringly of the visual ingenuities of *Zeitmasse* and *Gruppen*, and the sound effect arising from the parlendo voice scoring of *Carré*, traits echoed by Stravinsky in the speaking choruses of *Threni*, and the congregational muttering of the 'Libera Me' in *Requiem Canticles*.⁴

Letter to Robert Craft. 16 July 1972

Dear Mr Craft,

Fabers have promised to pass this letter on to you; I hope they do so promptly.

I wonder whether you would be good enough to help me with a little advice. I am working at the moment on a 'plain and easie'—at least, un-academic—introduction to the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen. As well as observations on the compositions themselves, I hope to include chapters on topics of related interest, and would like to include one on the influence of Stockhausen on Stravinsky's later works, of which I am also extremely fond.⁵

There seems to me clear evidence that apart from his expressed admiration for the *Zeitmasse*, for *Gruppen* and *Carré*, that Stravinsky not only knew but was attracted to *Kontra-Punkte*, since the rôle of the piano in *Movements* bears certain resemblances to that in the earlier Stockhausen piece. I see from a back number of *The Score* that this work was performed at one of your Evenings on the Roof concerts, so am confident that Stravinsky was familiar early on with the sound as well as the score, but what I don't understand is why the piece didn't come up in the *Conversations*.

Clearly the question of influence is a delicate matter, and I would not want to labour it. But so often in Stravinsky I seem to find a phrase or idea that says 'There, Karlheinz, isn't that what you were after?'—and says in a few notes and a single gesture what Stockhausen labours for half an hour to achieve. I mean, for example, the quasi-electronic accelerando effect in *Flood*, bars 285–287; the harp/celesta fadeout of *Movements*; the time-dislocation effects in *Agon* (Bransle Gay) and later in *Requiem Canticles* (Prelude), the tape-reverse effect (cf. *Gruppen* p. 96) of *Variations* p.16, and innumerable examples of woodwind polyrhythms. Other times the question seems more one of interpretation than of commentary: I hear echoes of the early electronic studies in the timbres of the Interlude to *Requiem Canticles*, for instance, and the marvellous, what you call 'Death-chords' of the Postlude, and which I hear as the passage of the soul, which I feel may have been inspired by the sight more than the sound of those odd, unequal trailing chords of the first set of Stockhausen's Piano Pieces (themselves time-reversed melodies plus pedal, as it were).

Yours very sincerely,

Reply from Robert Craft, August 10, 1972

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Dear Mr. Maconie,

I am very sorry to be so slow in answering your letter of July 16th. I have been conducting the New York City Ballet in Saratoga, went from there directly to Santa Fe and then to Boston.

You are quite correct in deducing that Stravinsky both knew and was attracted to *Kontra-Punkte*. I conducted the piece at a Monday Evening Concert (*not* Evenings on the Roof), but can no longer remember the date. (Lawrence Morton, ~~1113 N. Sweetzer, Apt. 7,~~ Los Angeles, California 90069, can give you information about this.) I think the performance must have been pretty poor, but Stravinsky came to rehearsals, as he did of everything, and he would, of course, have understood by reading the score, what my performance did not make clear.

I do not wish to comment on the matter of actual influence. I find your own observations extremely interesting and am inclined to agree. It is even possible that the chords in the Postlude of the *Canticles* have some connection with the first set of Stockhausen's Piano Pieces, yet when Stravinsky last listened to all of the Pieces together, he became exasperated by the pauses. In fact the piano pieces he is denigrating in an interview—I no longer remember exactly where—are Stockhausen's; this was not so much a reversal, I suspect, as a feeling of fatigue: it was some time in 1968 and he had listened to the whole album at a single hearing.

Stravinsky did know and was fond of Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, far more of the first movement than of the others.⁶

I cannot explain why none of these matters were ever mentioned in any published conversations, but those books were so haphazardly put together, as well as so dependent on circumstances, they hardly give a balanced picture of Stravinsky's enormous appetite for new music.

I look forward to your article on the Wolfe [*sic*] settings.⁷

Sincerely yours,

Robert Craft.

Notes

1. A reference to Stockhausen's programme notes for *Momente*, a work—and concept of time—in which Stravinsky had expressed interest in an earlier book of conversations with Craft.

2. Presumably the Aloys Kontarsky Columbia recording of the ‘Complete’ Piano works (I–XI) from 1967. While admiring the visual inventiveness of the scores of *Zyklus* and *Carré*, Stravinsky comments in the US edition (*Themes and Episodes*, New York: Knopf) ‘but the same music strikes me as timeless in the wrong sense when, instead of watching, I merely listen’ (corrected in the Faber edition to ‘unless my eye is engaged along with my ear’, that is, unless *both* senses are engaged, rather than just one).
3. Conceivably a reference to the ‘voids’ of *Klavierstück X*: empty spaces or erasures in which, as Roger Smalley observed, ‘the music seems to continue unheard underground’.
4. Stockhausen’s graphics in *Carré* are based on the phonetic script devised in 1909 by phonetician Daniel Jones for transcribing the inflection patterns of *recorded* speech. By design or default, the simplified notation of dots and curlicues enclosed within a two-line staff visually resemble a primitive form of medieval plainchant (which indeed they are).
5. The dedicated chapter did not eventuate, Stockhausen expressing irritation at any comparison of his work. But analogies were woven into the 1976 text of *The Works of Stockhausen*, and have continued to flourish in *Other Planets* (2005).
6. Apparently alluding to a sketch for an article for *TEMPO* identifying repeated allusions, in Stravinsky’s post-1950 serial compositions, to Bartók’s iconic two-part mirror counterpoint forming the coda to the first movement of *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*. These echoes of Bartók begin with the refrain of ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’ of *In Memoriam Dylan Thomas*; and are again taken up in the ecstatic tenor solo ‘Bibi vinum meum cum lacte meo’ from *Canticum Sacrum*, the bleak ‘Incipit lamentatio’ for female voices at the beginning of *Threni*, the instrumental coda of *Movements*, the final phrase of *Abraham and Isaac*, the closing ‘Alleluia’ to words by Thomas Dekker at [267] of *A Sermon, A Narrative, and A Prayer*, and even a tiny mirror-image intervallic fragment between piccolo and harp, in effect the ‘last gasp’ of *Requiem Canticles*. (‘Stravinsky’s Final Cadence’. *TEMPO* 103 – 1972, 18–23.)
7. The 1968 instrumentations are of Hugo Wolf, of course, not Tom Wolfe, the novelist author of ‘Radical chic’.