

An Interview with Kim Hill

ROBIN MACONIE

Kim Hill *Robin Maconie is a composer and musicologist whose latest book ranges from Plato to John Cage via Thomas Aquinas, Marcel Duchamp, Isaac Newton, and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Lots and lots about Stockhausen. The book is called Musicologia: musical knowledge from Plato to John Cage [Lanham MD, Scarecrow Press] and it is Robin Maconie's erudite and complex argument against the claim, advanced among others by Steven Pinker, that "music is just evolutionary cheesecake". Maconie says the discoveries of Pythagoras, Newton, and Einstein would not have been possible without a tradition of musical acoustics. The book is very possibly a work of genius, and I would have to spend several years of intense university study attempting to understand it. So, like a drowning person, I clutched at Robin Maconie's in-depth knowledge of the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, to whom he has already devoted four whole books and a documentary. Robin Maconie went to Europe after Victoria University studies, and I asked him why.*

Robin Maconie I wanted to study with the most up to date composers available so I headed first of all to Paris, to [Olivier] Messiaen; then was fortunate enough to be able to go on to Cologne. I wasn't actually registered with Stockhausen initially. I was signed up to a course given at the Cologne Music School by a contemporary, Bernd-Alois Zimmermann, a composer who spent most of the last part of his career under Stockhausen's shadow. But when I arrived in Cologne I discovered that Stockhausen was arranging courses, which were available for free, at the Konservatorium across town, and so I was able to combine the two. And I found Stockhausen's courses extremely challenging. They were being given by a whole range of avant-garde specialists, performers as well as composers.

KH *Is challenging another word for incomprehensible?*

RM No, not at all. I mean, the incomprehensible is a given. You go to learn, to discover what makes a person tick. To find out things. The interesting element was that we were not told how to do things so much by the composers themselves, as by the performers who were

part of the course. So in addition to the theoreticians and the composers, people like Luc Ferrari, Henri Pousseur, and Stockhausen himself, there were performers like Siegfried Palm (cello), Aurèle Nicolet (flute), Aloys Kontarsky (piano), and Christoph Caskel (percussion), people who were teaching how to interpret this music. So you could get to read these extremely complicated scores, and then see how gifted performers were able to make sense of them.

KH *If as you have said, communication is the ultimate aim of any composer, why would Stockhausen make it so difficult?*

RM Because unless you confront difficulty you never appreciate simplicity. When I taught students in the United States, beginners who had no knowledge of music, my first lesson was to make them understand that "everything you hear is true". That means that no matter what your reaction is, make a note of it and study your reaction. Because even if your reaction is a negative reaction, that is not the important thing: the important thing is the strength of the reaction. A negative reaction can easily turn into a positive reaction. Many people misconstrue their impressions as being negative feelings when in fact they are simply strong reactions.

KH *But it is difficult isn't it because the conventional view, which you accept, is that music is primarily about creating harmony.*

RM Yes, but harmony is an individual perception. Or rather, there are two kinds of harmony. There is collective harmony, which if you like can be described as a form of discipline.

KH *You mean, as in everybody doing the right thing at the right time.*

RM Yes, everybody moving in step. That is what we mean by "all singing from the same score sheet". In that sense, if you want a smoothly organized operation, you need harmony. And in fact music, classical music in particular, is a way of demonstrating harmonious organization: in fact, probably the major way of introducing the industrial revolution into Europe, by showing people how to work together, without compromising their specialist

talents, to a common time scheme, and produce perfect results every time. So in that sense music is about social discipline.

But there is another kind of harmony as well, and that other harmony is of harmonizing your understanding of the world with the reality of an uncertain or even chaotic everyday experience, and how to deal with it. The role of difficult music is to test the ability of the individual listener to understand difficulty.

KH *Shall we listen to some music that you have composed that has been influenced by Stockhausen, and you can tell me about it.*

RM This music [*Measures* (1984)] was composed in the early era of computing. The Apple IIe computers we were working with in the 1980s had 64K of memory, which is not terribly much. It was interesting to drive the software that had been developed for this equipment right to its limits. And when you drive the software to its limits, the sounds, which are purely musical sounds, start to break up as their frequencies begin to interfere with the sampling rate of the equipment itself, producing not only weird electronic sonorities, of a kind similar to Boulez's electronic music in *Répons*, but sounds that also start to wander in very interesting and naturalistic ways.

I was interested in creating a piece which I was convinced was the sort of thing that Stockhausen was wanting to do, but unable to achieve. In the last two or three decades of his life, Stockhausen composed a number of pieces in which the sound of one instrument is intended to interfere with the sound of another instrument. Not merely blend with it, but interfere with its vibrations so that instead of two notes coming from opposite directions, you created a kind of moving sound that is neither here nor there, but dancing in its own interspace in a manner controlled by both signals.

Electrical engineers and broadcasters like yourself who understand radio will understand what modulation is. To me the interesting thing was that Stockhausen never seemed to be able to push these ideas to a successful conclusion. In many of his later compositions he suggests the possibility of modulating between instruments from a number of angles, but the effect never quite works out. To the end of his life he had been attempting to do this with a simple analogue device called a vocoder, the EMS Vocoder, but with limited success. So it was exciting for me to discover that complex effects could be created digitally on these primitive Apple computers using very simple inputs to create wild and

magical effects that nobody had ever heard before, and that had potential.

KH *What instruments do you play?*

RM I grew up with the piano.

KH *So have you eschewed the piano now?*

RM It is an expensive device to run. I haven't seriously played the piano since I was at university. I took it to a certain point when I was at university; I think I gave the New Zealand premiere of Schoenberg's Op. 11 *Three Pieces* which is a very difficult piece of piano music. But after that circumstances took me abroad, and you can't cart a piano around with you as a poor student. Later on I began to concentrate on other things, most recently writing about music rather than creating it.

KH *Is it fair to say that Stockhausen is influential but not much listened to? Considering the people who acknowledge him as a influence, like Frank Zappa, The Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, and The Beatles. Do you sit down and listen to Stockhausen as other people might listen to these bands?*

RM Yes, I do. Not all the time. But these groups you mention—and Miles Davis is another who should be included among them—are people who are much more famous and are listened to by a much wider audience. When they listened, as musicians, to Stockhausen, they understood that something was going on in Stockhausen's music that was important to them, and that influence is refracted in their music. So those listeners among the public who prefer not to listen to Stockhausen's own music may still be exposed to his influence indirectly through these other more popular composers and musicians.

KH *You are very dismissive of composers like Michael Nyman and Philip Glass. You say they are utterly trivial. What makes the difference to you between 'trivial' and 'important'?*

RM Music that is repetitive and changes very slowly over time is very easy to write, after all. I wouldn't say that because Philip Glass—whose opinion of Stockhausen has actually

altered to become more respectful since the composer’s death—or the music of other composers is trivial it is not therefore interesting. What I would say is that what is interesting about it is its triviality, and its refusal to acknowledge complexity.

KH *Because that might be a deliberate policy rather than an incapacity?*

RM There is a marketing element to it, for sure, and you find it confirmed in their press interviews. My own feeling is that their aims should be more interesting than that. I certainly think that music can aspire to more than that. What is the point of composing finger exercises in the style of Carl Czerny when the image you have in mind is the trenches of the First World War? There are big issues that music deals with: emotional issues, and also philosophical issues, and to deal exclusively in the trivial, the industrial, and the repetitive, is to trivialize the art itself.

KH *You have made a number of statements about Stockhausen that seem to imply that the sheer incomprehensibility of his music is a measure of its worth. For example, you said “If a genius is someone whose ideas survive all attempts at explanation, then by that definition Stockhausen is the nearest thing to Beethoven that this century (meaning the twentieth century) has produced.” —Because “his music lasts”.*

“Survive all attempts at explanation”. So being able to explain something is in some way a demonstration of its — simplistic nature?

RM Stockhausen actually admonished me on this very issue in a passage in my book *Other Planets*. It is a very reasonable point. Throughout his life Stockhausen resisted the idea that his music could ever be explained. I objected to this because I thought there is nothing that a human being can produce that isn’t explicable, at least at some level. But Stockhausen’s own view, which he expresses with great eloquence in the first chapter of *Other Planets*, is that if you explain something you kill it dead, and there is nothing more to discuss. Explanation is the kiss of death to art, to literature, to poetry, to anything. What Stockhausen is against is the idea that when you explain something you explain it definitively. He is saying there is no such thing as a definitive explanation.

I am in perfect agreement with that. That is why my own writings are deliberately loose and conjectural, because what I want is for other people to come along and say, oh no,

he's got that wrong there, in order for the conversation to continue. Because once the conversation stops, the music stops. Unless you happen to like The Grateful Dead and finally discover that Stockhausen is lurking in there as well.

KH *Do you listen to The Grateful Dead?*

RM No.

KH *At home in Dannevirke, what would you listen to?*

RM I have been listening most recently to a new Naxos recording of Stefan Wolpe's music [Wolpe: Chamber Music, Naxos 8.559262]. Wolpe is a composer Stravinsky praised in his conversation books with Robert Craft from the early sixties. I used to own a longplaying record of Wolpe's music and was never completely won over by it; however this new Naxos recording is a revelation. The music is very Webernian, very structuralist, and beautifully executed, and what this tells you is that it takes sixty or seventy years for musicians to catch up with some of this new music, but it is worth the wait. This is the other aspect to the "definitive" argument: you cannot be definitive about phenomena in art and culture that are still being debated and are still controversial after a century or two centuries.

KH *You have argued that the music of John Cage and Stockhausen, and other twentieth-century composers, is linked with ideas which emerged in ancient Greece, in 500 BC. Were they aware of this connection, or is this your idea?*

RM I am always fascinated by paradox. I am also fascinated by the way modern science is negotiating with paradox: for example, with counterintuitive notions like multiple universes. What interests me is that no matter what age you live in, whether ancient Greece or modern-day Manhattan, the fundamental paradoxes are always the same: for example, the square root of 2 is always a noncomputable number. And because the paradoxes never change for all generations for all times, it is only fair to consider that in ancient times people were as intrigued by these paradoxes as we are today, but that they discovered different ways of expressing them. For example, in the new book *Musicologia* I consider the image of the snake in the Garden of Eden: why is the snake an object of abhorrence? What is this whole

narrative about? And you find a perspective on this and other old stories and myths which makes sense from a contemporary viewpoint, so that the issue is no longer about morality or the sinful nature of women at all.

KH *So what is it about?*

RM In the case of the snake, the snake represents the noncomputable nature of movement.

KH *The immeasurable.*

RM How does it move? Where does it begin and end?

Or take another example, one closer to home. Some time ago I wrote to a friend in Auckland, a philosopher of music, Stephen Davies, with a conundrum: Is Stephen Hawking's voice "his"? And if it is not "his" voice, whose voice is it? This was prompted by an episode of *The Simpsons* in which Stephen Hawking makes a guest appearance. My question has to do with the notion of identity, and also the notion of meaning. On the identity front, Stephen Hawking's voice is not his voice, but the voice of an off the shelf device, a voice synthesizer. The second part, what does he mean, we also don't know for sure because the flow of his voice, the inflection, is again the product of software design operating on a text, and not the speech impulse of a physical act. The only way Hawking can influence the expression of what he is saying is through his choice of words. But his choice of words in fact may not make sense, or be grammatically accurate, or in fact represent what he really means to say, because words themselves are unreliable. So when you are considering the question of Stephen Hawking's voice you are actually inquiring into the nature of identity.

KH *Get me back to the snake.*

RM The snake is a similar puzzle. When you look at a snake you say, how does it move? It has no legs. And then you have the question of how to describe an undulating movement. There is a musical correspondence here as well. The snake equivalent in a musical sense is the sine wave. But it is also about whether light is particle or wave. If you describe light as

particles, you are describing it as little bits—quanta—of matter, or energy, or information each existing in a specific location in space and time (or even, out of time). But in asking whether light is particle or wave, as soon as you mention wave you are introducing the time dimension, because a wave is a temporal event, an undulation, which seems to me like a contradiction in terminology. I am puzzled by the fact that those who write about particle and wave duality do not seem to address the discrepancy between the instantaneous nature of the particle, and the necessarily temporal nature of a wave. A wave needs to have continuity and extension in space and time.

KH *You say Stockhausen was inquiring into the fundamental particles of music?*

RM He wasn't the first in music: Webern was doing so before him. This was all part of a much larger enterprise into uncovering the fundamental particles of speech, that was going on as far back as the time of Cook's voyages.

KH *How are we getting back to Cook?*

RM When [James] Cook, and [Joseph] Banks, and the others came to the Pacific, they were following a dream of a Great Southern continent, and wondering how to establish diplomatic relations with a civilization whose language they did not understand. How, they asked, will they know we mean them no harm, and how will we know, from the way they behave and the words they speak (even though we do not understand the words) whether they harbour friendly or hostile intentions towards us? To the eighteenth-century scientist the art of discerning meaning in the way people speak was associated with philology and the art of rhetoric, which is the art of influencing people at a distance not so much by what you say, but by the manner in how you say it. So the Royal Society team who accompanied Cook to investigate the Pacific were equipped with a basic understanding, and interest, in the particles of speech. Banks, for example, carried a diary in which was written a set of key words: face, stomach, arm, foot and so on—and at every staging post on the voyage from Madagascar through and around the Pacific he asked native speakers what words they used for these particular items. That way the explorers were able to compile not only small vocabularies, but also to compare languages, and from the comparison to sense the movement of language from one area to another, in support of the concept of a Great

Migration from Egypt through to the Pacific. The underlying methodology of studying how language works was ultimately directed at discovering the basic syllables or fundamental particles of language itself. And when they reached [New Zealand] Maori, that was as far as they could go, because they believed Maori were the most remote and ancient primeval civilization to have survived.

KH *You have said that Maori imagery influenced the music of Mozart and Beethoven. How is this?*

RM Through Georg Forster, who with his father Johann Reinhold Forster accompanied Cook on his second voyage. Both Forsters came from the same region of Germany as the composer Handel, and being German, both were musically trained. Georg Forster was a young proto-revolutionary, and both he and his father studied Maori and Pacific Island communities as representatives of primeval human culture. The unspoken purpose of their study was to find an alternative social order to the traditional hierarchical societies of Europe, based on aristocratic rule, which were beginning to break down.

KH *The idea of the Noble Savage.*

RM That is rather too condescending, since it was more about finding out what human beings are really like in their natural state. Georg Forster was a young man when he travelled with Cook, and for a long time after his return to Europe he continued to travel widely, even as far afield as the Russian court of Catherine the Great, who at one time was almost persuaded to sponsor a further voyage of exploration to the Pacific with Forster as leader. Among those with whom Forster came in contact was the Countess Thun-Hohenstein, the patroness in Vienna of Mozart, Beethoven, and Haydn. Her husband, though an aristocrat, shared Forster’s sympathies for social change. Forster and Mozart were actually signed up to the same Masonic Lodge in Vienna in 1785. So they were not only outwardly sympathetic to the idea of social reform, they were also members of the same club.

Forster’s fame rested in his writings and translations, and public interest in his experiences of encounters with Maori, and demonstrations of the *haka* or war dance at these upper-class soirées—

KH —*Demonstrations of the haka?*

RM Most certainly. In the German edition of his travels around the world with Cook (just one among many publications by European explorers which to our great discredit are largely ignored by New Zealand historians) Forster describes a performance of the *haka* given on the deck of the *Resolution* in a passage so vivid and rhythmic it cannot be read aloud without evoking the actual performance. One can easily imagine him later in life as a social celebrity, overweight, puffing a bit, stamping and declaiming in front of a nervous audience. Out of this image of primeval humanity, the image of the *haka*, the fierce confrontational nature of which so impressed the Germans, along with the prevailing idea that such displays of ritual aggression represented the essence of human nature in its primeval condition, living as free spirits—emerge all of these qualities we find embodied in the music and persona of Beethoven, and to a lesser degree in Mozart as well. For instance, if you make a clinical analysis of Papageno’s famous aria “Der Vogelfänger bin ich ja” from *The Magic Flute*—music which sounds totally classical at first impression—it turns out to be a melody on four notes with little explosions at the end of each phrase, which is stylistically very typical of Maori ceremonial chant. And the chorus features a little rising five-note refrain played on a flute, which you can imagine as the musical version of a *koru* motif or unfurling frond—or, if you like, an erection (the *koru* is also the logo of Air New Zealand, who should perhaps change their name to Air Viagra). Because that is what the melody stands for, and what the *koru* motif in fact is, an image of growth, of unfurling upward.

So the idea that Maori imagery influenced the culture of music in Europe, through to Borodin and even Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, has its basis in an attachment to a primitivism which was a totally artificial construct for Europe in the nineteenth century, and how the imagery of primeval human nature associated with these powerful rhythms and repetitive patterns, prompted by the initial encounters of Forster and others with Maori came into wider circulation throughout Europe.

KH *Interesting you should say that, since you have been accused of comparing New Zealand composer Douglas Lilburn unfavourably with Stockhausen, of wilfully devaluing the local in favour of the international. What you would appear to be saying is that music is global, we are all in it together.*

RM Absolutely. By the way, I am not devaluing Lilburn’s attempts to integrate with Maori culture. What I am objecting to in Lilburn’s use of Maori imagery in the electronic composition *The Return* (1967) is the quality of craftsmanship.

KH *In what way?*

RM It’s not good enough technically. There is no other way to say it. When you understand what makes a good technical performance, such as knowing how to edit a tape and appreciating what good quality sound is, there is no comparison between what Stockhausen, with all the technical help at his disposal, achieved in a work like *Gesang der Jünglinge*—a dazzling electronic work from 1955 for five channels, for goodness’ sake—compared to what Douglas was capable of producing.

KH *One of the New Zealand composers that you have championed is Alfred Hill. You say more people should know about him. Who was he?*

RM Alfred Hill was New Zealand’s first composer. He started off as a violinist, came from a very musical family, and was sent away to Leipzig to study in the 1880s, from which he returned as a composer. He was ahead of his time, and attempted with some success to introduce classical music to New Zealand public life. After the first world war, however, he was made to feel uncomfortable because of having studied in Germany. It was at a time in New Zealand of violent public reaction against anything German that also affected our university life, the expulsion of scholars like Von Zedlitz, and poisoned relationships toward other Germans who had made invaluable contributions to New Zealand exploration and science. It was a terrible era in which Hill was blacklisted and forced to go off to Australia to live, despite many years of working with Maori, even at one stage hoping to establish a music school at Rotorua with Maori support. The proposal did not suit the politicians of the day, so was not pursued.

Alfred was a great believer in integrating Maori and European traditions. Nowadays it is regarded as embarrassing for Europeans to embrace and, as it were “colonise” Maori culture and traditions, but at the time Hill was active, Maori themselves were appreciative and eager to cooperate with those who respected their traditions and were willing to help preserve and pass on their cultural messages to future generations.

Coincidentally, only a few months ago I read a paper by Alistair Fox ["Italy in the Maori Imaginary: the Novels of Witi Ihimaera and *Te Tangata Whai Rawa o Weniti / the Maori Merchant of Venice*. *NZSA Bulletin of New Zealand Studies* 2 (2010), 1–13] on the experiences of the Maori Battalion in Italy during the war in the early forties. When Maori soldiers were stationed in Italy after Monte Cassino they quickly fraternised with the local community and learned to speak Italian and talked to them in their language; and among the reasons they identified so readily with the Italian people were a shared sense of oppression, as occupied peoples, and a shared tradition of expressing themselves through song, familiar in the high art of opera bass singer Inia te Wiata, as well as the popular music of Howard Morrison. Here in New Zealand we have a tradition of sending Maori and Pasifika singers abroad and are unsurprised that they do extremely well in classical opera, and it doesn't seem to conflict with their individual sense of cultural identity at all, and yet our own institutions here in New Zealand, both at school and university level, seem to have no way either of preparing these naturally gifted students for a life in opera, or of recognizing and cultivating their musical talents in an appropriate way. This is a deficiency in our culture that we ought to address.

KH *I suspect that if we are going to start talking about the inadequacies of education and culture, we's going to be here for the next ten years.*

RM I hope not, because I have been talking about them for the past ten years and getting nowhere. Now you know why I write books.

KH *With the utmost respect, do you mind if I tell you that I find your book Musicologia to be way over my head? I would need to do a lot of university courses to understand it.*

RM I'm not sure about that, and certainly I don't mind. Perhaps it reflects the fact that I don't read fiction.

KH *There is stuff going on in your head, isn't there?*

RM Perhaps I should add that the new book is about the fifth or sixth book I have written on this subject. It might be easier to start with *The Concept of Music* which came out in 1991

and is the most successful of the series so far.

KH *You have a chapter [in Musicologia] devoted to fractals; I merely point this out because we were talking about Benoît Mandelbrot the other day.*

RM I was pleased to hear it.

KH *“Fractal Music” —can you explain it quickly?*

RM Fractal theory is able to explain the irregularities of music, either in terms of a melody moving up and down, or as texture of varying density. Music is not entirely monotonous, it doesn't stay on one note or in one rhythm. But it is also not totally chaotic. It's somewhere between the two. Fractals provides a way of rationalizing that degree of roughness or irregularity. For me it provided a way of reconciling the music of a John Cage, who was all about avoiding making decisions and just letting sounds be free, and the serialists at the other end of the spectrum, composers like Xenakis, total control freaks whose music seemed to be going anywhere and nowhere at the same time and in much the same way.

Working with the primitive computers at Surrey University in the 1980s, I produced a little software program based on Mandelbrot for composing melodies by random selection. I found that if I set the parameters to very narrow parameters, I would get melodies resembling middle-Eastern chant, and if I widened the parameters a little bit, they began to sound more like the “Air on a G string” by J. S. Bach. Then if you really pushed the boundaries, all of a sudden what emerged was like Xenakis or Boulez. And I thought this is wonderful, because it means that this music is no longer separate categories, we now have a mechanism which is mathematically pure, very elegant, and very simple and attractive, to enable us to say that music, that melody, that emotional effect is a product of a particular measure of mathematics, whereas another melody or characteristic texture corresponds to a different location along the same sliding scale of values. For myself, after growing up as a student wondering how in heaven's name I was going to reconcile the total determinism of Stockhausen with the indeterminacy of Cage, Mandelbrot provided the answer, and I am forever grateful for that.

KH *That was Robin Maconie, whose book is called Musicologia: Musical Knowledge from Plato to John Cage. It doesn't have many pictures in it, but all of them are complicated and*

geometrical. It has a very beautiful cover, a painting by Michael Smither, appropriately called ‘Middle C’.

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