

Stockhausen after 9/11

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Robin Maconie comments: Shortly after Stockhausen’s death was announced I was approached by Artforum to contribute to a memorial symposium in the composer’s honor. I was asked to address the controversy over his remarks to the press relating to the 9/11 attack. Stockhausen deserved and expected his interpretation of so shocking an event to be understood by educated correspondents from the perspective of a European history and philosophy of suffering, as a statement of resistance to the logic of war in the spirit of surrealist art, and not least as a haunting reminder of the basis of western civilization represented in the emblems and injunctions of Christian morality.

Born in 1928, Karlheinz Stockhausen grew up in rural Germany under Nazism, endured deprivation and war, flirted with poetry, and studied philosophy, finally deciding in 1950 to devote his life to the defense of so-called “degenerate” art, and to composing a new music of transcendent abstraction. Inspired by the power of radio, he first came to public attention as a white-coated nuclear age modernist and composer of the awe-inspiring *Song of the Youths*, a five-channel tape composition dedicated to the Catholic faith and grounded in information science and linguistics. In both his electronic and instrumental music Stockhausen pursued a poetic of spatiality and movement prefigured in Disney’s 1940 *Fantasia* but abandoned by Hollywood as impractical (1). To his musical inventions he brought an unparalleled fluency in acoustics and rejection of cliché. The intense frown and piercing gaze of the young man situated in the back row of the cover of the Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper* album is a pose straight out of Albrecht Dürer’s *Melencolia I*—a pictorial association extending to the surrounding paraphernalia of hourglass, numerology, astrology, geometry, and even to the symbolism of the carpenter’s nails scattered on the floor. Stockhausen’s music is intelligent, haunting, elusive, intimidating, and curiously revealing, to the performer or listener who is prepared to work for it, of an inexplicable and profound beauty. Underpinning the invertible Bauhaus graphics and jazzy exuberance of *Zyklus* (1959) for solo percussionist, for example, is a delightful and truly genial dissertation on chance and determinism.

Early in the 1950s Stockhausen forged a close association with Pierre Boulez, whose *Le Marteau sans maître* (1954–57) has affinities with *Kreuzspiel* (Cross-play; 1951 revised 1959). Despite their public differences, their professional rivalry continued to the end of Stockhausen’s life and has yet to attract serious scholarly inquiry. Another composer to be impressed by the young German genius was Igor Stravinsky, then in

his seventies, whose *Movements for piano and orchestra* (1959–60) owes much of its élan to Stockhausen's *Kontra-Punkte* (1952–53) for similar forces. Stockhausen's admiration of Edgar Varèse, and friendship with New York composers Morton Feldman and Earle Brown, are chronicled in *Rolling Stone* correspondent Jonathan Cott's fascinating *Stockhausen: Conversations with the composer* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973).

Imagine Stockhausen as a quintessentially American composer. Think of Charles Ives, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, Henry Brant, or Harry Partch, all of whom are refracted to some degree in his music. Forget the recordings he is alleged to have made with Miles Davis for Columbia that nobody has ever heard: this is a composer whose imagery of freedom was forged in the weird hybrid jazz of Friedrich Hollaender and Kurt Weill in the decadent twenties, nourished by the spread of black music throughout Europe in the flapper era of Josephine Baker, and reinforced at boarding school during the war by British Army radio broadcasts of American jazz to which the teenager listened surreptitiously late at night. Energetic and raucous freedom is the message of the sardonic big band interruptions of the song "Frei" from the *Drei Lieder* for alto voice and chamber orchestra, a student work from 1950. Just as some critics already hear *Gruppen* for three orchestras (1955–57) as a supersized Stan Kenton set piece with brass choruses swooping to left and right, so the rest of us may one day learn to hear *Piano Piece VI* (1954–55, revised 1961) as a massive 20-minute unaccompanied break in the spirit of Thelonious Monk, *Zeitmasse* for wind quintet (1955–56) as pure dixieland, and the rapturous *Piano Piece X* (1954, revised 1961), alternating brilliant fingerwork and fistfuls of glissando clusters, as a zany meld of Jerry Lee Lewis and Oscar Peterson. Stockhausen grew up in a militarized Germany that had not learned how to "swing" or bend the beat, an intuitive freedom in expression he persisted in trying to notate with Germanic precision. Of the intricately interlaced mathematical rhythms of his early works, his pianist friend Aloys Kontarsky said "Oh, that's just his way of notating rubato". Part of him pined for big band jazz: not just the sound, but for a peculiarly American blend of corporate discipline and pizzazz perhaps best achieved in the over-the-top "Lucifer's Dance" (the third scene of *Samstag aus LICHT* [Saturday from LIGHT], 1981–83), music for a vertical wall of players styled as an animated Wizard of Oz and interpreted on a 1990 cd with enormous panache by the University of Michigan Symphonic Band. Jazz was wicked, jazz was fun, but for an entrenched moralist of the high German tradition, the freedom of jazz was also a temptation to lose sight of the higher virtues in favor of creature comforts and the easy life.

Stockhausen's abiding concerns are musical rather than personal, even in his most radical works such as the *Helicopter String Quartet* (1992–93), outwardly a ceremony of leave-taking. They are not *his* statements, they are the statements he sensed music had to make, and of which he was merely the messenger. Witness as a youth to the demoralizing consequences of an imposed socialist realism, and sensitive from early in his career to any suggestion of state censorship of artistic expression, Stockhausen defended John Cage's extravagant freedom of invention in a skeptical Europe as a necessary antidote to neoclassic conservatism, despite the fact that Cage's performances were often intellectually as well as artistically

inconclusive. He could and did turn the dross of others' inspirations into gold, for example *Mantra* (1970), which takes the implications of Cage's prepared piano to an entirely new level; or *Inori* (1973–74), reconstructing the occult gestures of thereminista Clara Rockmore as a language of prayer translated into a music of unbelievable richness and color. His habit of invention was fueled as much by technical challenge and scientific goals as by aesthetic ambition. When Pierre Boulez lost patience with *musique concrète*, Stockhausen saw a purpose beyond its invincible clumsiness, realising that the manipulation of musical objects or "samples" required a distinctive approach and aesthetic he was able to provide in the graphic scores *Prozession* (1967) and *Kurzwellen* (1968) consisting of plus, minus, and equal signs: trans-formational recipes of a powerful and challenging simplicity to be executed onstage and in real time. Every idea to which he devoted attention, through to *Aus den Sieben Tagen* (From the Seven Days: 1968), text pieces after minimalist La Monte Young, emerged purified and rededicated, stripped of any last residue of kitsch or cliché, and relaunched as a spiritual exercise.

Stockhausen's moral and intellectual world is difficult for many to access because most of the rest of us identify morality and intellect with disposing of problems and achieving a state of relative balance. For the war-scarred generation of Boulez, Stockhausen, Xenakis, Nono, Ligeti and others, however, the only morality lay in maintaining intellectual clarity and personal integrity against a real and ongoing threat of nuclear destruction. To create art and survive, intact, in defiance of death, is moral to a point of utter recklessness. For this reason the music of the avant-garde generation stands out as an art of confrontation, asking difficult questions, and seeking to change minds. We encounter the same spirit of challenge and resistance in the art of Duchamp, the plays of Beckett, the elliptical aphorisms of a Cage, the banter of a Groucho Marx, and the melancholy wordplay of Helmut Heissenbüttel, the German concrete poet whose *Simple Grammatical Meditations* are woven into the fabric of Stockhausen's *Mikrophonie II* (1965). While it is tempting to characterize the composer as a tragic victim, after Werner Herzog's Kaspar Hauser, or the orphaned child of Berg's opera *Wozzeck*, there is also a consciously fantastical, irreverent side to Stockhausen, modeled in the old tradition of the court jester, Till Eulenspiegel of German folklore, or indeed, the Baron Munchausen of fiction.

Judging by the press coverage of his death, which was unexpected but, to those acquainted with his musical symbolism, long premeditated, Stockhausen was a once famous but long since marginalized figure whose main claim to public attention was that he made the cover of the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album, was admired by minor celebrities of the pop world, and had become infamous in recent years for describing the tragedy of 9/11 as a work of art on a cosmic scale. (In an injudicious comment made off the record to supposedly friendly reporters at a Hamburg Music Festival news conference five days after the terrorist attack, Stockhausen had said, "That minds accomplish in one act something that we in music can't dream of, that people rehearse like mad for ten years, totally fanatically, for a concert and then die—that's the greatest work of art there is in the entire cosmos.") It was a provocative remark which should have remained private, but the story was leaked and led to a public outcry. That the composer's motives for saying what he did remain unknown to a majority who have never paid any attention to his music is a

matter for sober reflection. What he meant was perfectly clear to his German audience, to the press representative who leaked the story, to the Festival management who were present at the conference, and to Hamburg Culture Senator Christina Weiss, whose handling of the ensuing debacle contributed to her defeat at the polls a few months later. At the heart of this public relations disaster lay the deeply serious issue of how modern art and music can respond, or if they can respond at all, to the threat of terrorism. That Stockhausen was challenged on this very issue should not be regarded as a disaster, even though he took it personally and it cost him a great deal. The peculiar distinction of this episode is that his opinion was asked at all.(2)

In a scathing and factually exhaustive account of what actually transpired at the fateful press conference, his companion, American clarinetist Suzanne Stephens defended Stockhausen as a bewildered old man drawn into a media trap and cynically abandoned by a Festival administration and its political backers, who were already uneasy at press accusations that Hamburg had provided a safe haven for some of the terrorists.(3) Or one can go a step further and interpret the entire affair as a fatwa deliberately engineered by the Festival authorities, with the connivance of disaffected members of the press corps, to counter the massive loss it was already clear the Festival was bound to incur in the wake of the Twin Towers attack, by removing at a stroke its single most expensive component—a four-day program of Stockhausen’s works including first performances of scenes from *Freitag aus LICHT* (Friday from LIGHT; 1991–94)—without risk of recrimination or redress. This is to see the affair as tragic farce worthy of the attentions of a Tom Stoppard or Michael Frayn.

At Stockhausen’s level of awareness, however, a level of divination at which things that happen to him are construed not trivially or personally but as a convergence of “cosmic” forces for which the artist is simply a lightning rod, what matters is not who is to blame or their individual motivations, but the absolute reality of 9/11 and the artist’s moral duty to account for it. Stephens was missing the point. The event *had* to happen because it *did* happen. That the composer was misconstrued is par for the course.

Stockhausen’s response was pure Buñuel. He was asking his audience to understand the attack from a completely opposite perspective (“now all of you must adjust your brains,” he had said by way of introduction), as an existential act, like the exploding car bomb taking out the main character (a diplomat) early in *That Obscure Object of Desire*, an event to be understood in retrospect as a political act, but one which at the moment of experience, in the movie as on CNN, strikes the unguarded viewer as an act of God, a metaphysical experience and profoundly mysterious and terrifying aesthetic event, like the thunderbolt that shatters the nervous tension of the final movement of Haydn’s revolutionary “Drumroll” Symphony and is intended as an intimation of divine retribution. Tense with excitement, as one can infer from the transcript, Stockhausen went on to say that for such a feat of imagination to be executed in reality was profoundly immoral. Surely that was enough. The opinion of a musician both of whose parents were the victims of war, the mother by lethal injection, the father at the eastern front, a survivor who worked out the final six

months of resistance as an orderly in a field hospital caring for and comforting *American* war victims of *Allied* phosphor bombs, speaking English to them and playing music to ease their suffering, deserves respect as the view of one who knows what war is about, has suffered and forgiven, and who does not shrink from confronting the moral ambiguities of international conflict, or from recognizing that actions undertaken in a morally defensible cause can still inflict enormous cruelty on the innocent.

For Stockhausen, the issue was not just how art in the modern world can respond to the presence of evil, but whether or not art deserves to survive. In past centuries the art icons of Christianity testified to a life of suffering and transcendence among peoples for whom suffering was a way of life for which there existed no other remedy than passive acceptance and the promise of a happier life in the hereafter. In its own terms Stockhausen's music is also a testament to suffering—it is both difficult to learn and hard to listen to—but a suffering that promises relief in the here and now to those who believe, and are prepared to put in the necessary work. The notion of performance as goal-directed activity from an incomplete script is routine in Hollywood and on Broadway, but traditionally alien to art music. It signifies that a Stockhausen score may require the invention of new skills or techniques in order to be realised effectively. A perfect example is *Mixtur* (1966) for electronically modulated instrumental sounds. Problems with the equipment led to a public rift with Boulez, who had agreed to conduct the premiere and was offended that the electronically modified sounds were unacceptably distorted. In 1970, after encountering cleaner technology in Japan, Stockhausen added a filter stage to create the magical “altered reality” of *Mantra* for two pianos and ring modulation. The problem of distortion was solved, but Boulez was unimpressed and *Mixtur* did not obtain a retrofit.

The equivalent concept of a “work in progress” in the music of Boulez, Cage, Berio, or Stockhausen, implies a research ethic that accepts temporary failures and false trails in pursuit of a higher goal. It rejects the cynical notion, all too frequently employed in attacks on the avant-garde, that a work of art has no ultimate purpose other than as an assertion of personal freedom and act of protest against moral and physical enslavement. The latter argument from self-determination has come down to us as a disturbing legacy of the revolutionary counter-culture of Jean-Jacques Rousseau; it led inexorably to the moral vacuum of de Sade, the despair and madness of Nietzsche, and ultimately to the desperate nihilism of André Breton who, in the name of total freedom and personal transcendence, identified the primary gesture of surrealism—firing at random into the crowd—in terms doomed to be taken all too literally by generations of susceptible adolescents harboring visions of instant glory and enjoying unconstrained access to lethal weaponry.

That Stockhausen identified himself with the surrealist leader and demagogue might have been expected. Both had experienced the folly and slaughter of war as frontline hospital orderlies. Both believed in the healing power of a new art dedicated to the irrational and transcendental. Each saw himself as an autocratic intelligence and revolutionary leader. As a new arrival in Paris in 1952 Stockhausen had been inducted into the politics of art by none other than Boulez, whose commitment to

Antonin Artaud and the theater of frenzy had been aroused in turn by Jean-Louis Barrault and his circle as an antidote to the Nazi presence in occupied Paris. According to the composer's version of events, the seven days of retreat that inspired Stockhausen's text compositions *From the Seven Days* in the fateful year 1968 were prompted by anguish over his separation from his second wife, Mary Bauermeister; and the texts in turn by readings of Sri Aurobindo, the sage of militant resistance. Concealed within this account of a crucial period of conversion to a new mode of direct intuition, however, is a reference to the episode of fasting, dream, and inspiration recorded in Breton's 1924 Surrealist Manifesto, of which the composer's remarks on the speed of intuition, in the 1971 lecture "Intuitive Music," are a direct paraphrase.(4) Rumors of a youthful allegiance to Breton's aesthetic of violence may well have piqued media interest in the response of the old cultural warrior to the events of 9/11 in the first place.

From the time of Beethoven, the German people had been accustomed to turn to their leading composers for moral guidance in times of crisis. They sought answers in Wagner, in Strauss's paraphrase of Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, in Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, and, after the second world war, in *Moses und Aron*, Schoenberg's dramatic oratorio on the subject of leadership to a Promised Land, a work abandoned unfinished at the composer's death at the prophet's heartrending cry "Oh word! Oh word, that I lack!" The journalists covering the Hamburg Music Festival's press conference were well aware that Stockhausen had devoted the previous twenty-four years to composing *LICHT*, a series of philosophical operas, or passion plays, named after the seven days of the week, and aiming to reconcile the contrary impulses of human nature in an abstract panoply of positive and negative energies patterned after Wagner and Goethe's *Faust*. The composer had already ventured skyward with the *Helicopter String Quartet*, a rite of passage or farewell with unsettling Futurist undertones of commitment to the cleansing power of war. These German media correspondents included writers of considerable sophistication and culture. When the composer spoke of himself as "a medium," they understood the allusion to Beethoven saying "I am only a vessel." When Stockhausen declared that "liking means remembering" they recognized the voice of Socrates on his deathbed, recorded by Plato in the *Phaedo*. They well knew that this was a composer given to oracular pronouncements drawn on the prophecies of great and not-so-great literature: William Blake, Goethe, Novalis, Christian Morgenstern. They also knew that some of his sources of inspiration could be elaborately camouflaged.(5)

After the evening-long play of voices of *Momente* (1961–64, revised 1972), a cantata merging snapshots of love and reconciliation in his personal life with messages of equality and emancipation of black Americans, expressed in an idiom combining the intimacy of late night cabaret with the joyfully inspired rhetoric of black gospel music, it had taken a huge leap of faith for Stockhausen to embark on a project as monumental as *LICHT*, planned from the outset to take some twenty-five years to complete. It also took courage to defy convention and make the transition from *Momente*'s gospel idiom, a libretto whose narrative remains coherent and intelligible despite the music's multifaceted and nonlinear structure, to the starkly revelatory messages of pure, undigested suffering of *Donnerstag* (1978–80) and *Samstag aus LICHT* (Thursday and Saturday from *LIGHT*), the first two operas to be composed,

in which painful scenes are recreated of his parents' death, and the agonies of American war casualties. Stockhausen has consistently come under fire for abandoning the literary conventions of opera in favor of a range of vocalizations varying from purely acoustic tones and noises—shown to entrancing effect in the tape composition *Invisible Choirs* (1979)—via carefully-planned degrees of confusion, to fully intelligible (and deliberately banal) dialog. The acceptance of unformed, randomized or fragmented speech had already been embraced intellectually by Cage, as a necessary consequence of chance operations performed on a range of text materials—including Wittgenstein—and by the surrealists through techniques designed to eliminate personal preferences. Cultural historian Ian Rodger has attributed the emergence of an aesthetic of incoherence to postwar radio, in particular the radio dramas of Beckett and Ionesco, and to the medium of tape recording which came into regular use in Europe in 1951–52, at precisely the time Stockhausen began his apprenticeship in electronic music under the auspices of Cologne radio's drama division. For poets like Breton, Beckett, Ionesco and Heissenbüttel, the tape medium revealed the sufferings of inarticulate social derelicts and lost souls with searing clarity. Stockhausen's theater of LIGHT draws its moral conviction from an art of radio conceived not as literature but rather as an audible poetry of words, silence, music, and special effects, timed and scripted with meticulous precision, and rejecting the prevailing classical style of poetic diction in virtually the same terms as Wordsworth, 150 years before, had advocated the unfettered idioms of natural speech in the Preface to his *Lyrical Ballads*.(6)

In the works of a composer as obsessed as Stockhausen with hidden codes, with serialism as a method of codemaking either to generate new worlds of experience, or as a means of establishing a logical basis for an otherwise chaotic world, it is natural to encounter coded signatures in the musical fabric. The syllable “Hu!” emerges as a sign of life in *Ylem* (1972), a musical fable depicting the expansion and contraction of our current universe in a mere 21 minutes, and its renewed expansion thereafter in an alternate spacetime outside the concert chamber. It alludes to *hu*-manity and also to *hu*-bris; in Greek mythology to the cry of the owl, emblem of the goddess Athena and wisdom, but to German speakers also a covert expression of disgust, the equivalent of “Ugh!” The syllable reappears in *Inori* cunningly disguised as a sacred object and the subject of a solemn preconcert talk titled “*Vortrag über HU*” (Lecture on HU, 1974), ostensibly a musicological endorsement, but actually a criticism of a harmonic idiom the composer privately regarded as depraved and corrupt, delivered tongue in cheek after the manner of critic and philosopher Theodor Adorno as parodied by Mauricio Kagel in the theater piece *Sur Scène* (1960). Wherever the “Hu!” syllable is encountered as a leitmotif of the human actions on display in *LICHT*, it carries a cautionary message.

The syllable “Ka” for Karlheinz became his personal sign. Anything with “Ka” in the title was automatically imbued with private significance. It became a way of orientating himself in a real world of chance encounters and recollections: of Karl Kraus, kabarett, Kathakali, Kagel, and above all with flutist Kathinka Pasveer, his companion and muse in later life. In 1972, at the Shiraz Festival in Iran, when *LICHT* was just an idea in formation, he experienced the epiphany of Robert Wilson's *Ka Mountain*, a ritual of spiritual ascent enacted over seven days and nights on the slopes of the sacred mountain of Haft Tan, improvised by psychologically

impaired members of the Byrd Hoffman school of art therapy in New York, and culminating on the final night against the simulated backdrop of a blazing Manhattan.(7) Years later, in 2001, with the opera cycle nearing completion, Stockhausen found himself facing accusations of moral complicity based on the grotesque equation of a benign music theater of hovering helicopters with the choreographed assault of four hijacked passenger aircraft on iconic financial and military strongholds. Nature herself found it hard to forgive, and took a cruel revenge. After 2005, and the brutal irony of Hurricane Katrina—another disaster for which he would also be presumed accountable—the composer had had enough.

Notes

1. Outcome of a collaboration between Disney, RCA, and conductor Leopold Stokowski, the *Fantasound* system was a high definition optical (sound on film) recording and sound projection system intended for the movie industry, requiring a second dedicated 35mm apparatus delivering stereo sound to left, center, and right audio channels in front of the viewer, and ambient sound to 44 speakers located to the sides and rear of the auditorium, after passing through a complex system of relays and delays.

Photophone Handbook for Projectionists 2nd edition. Camden NJ: RCA Manufacturing Company, Inc., 1941, 32–37.

2. It probably did not help matters that *Freitag aus LICHT* is a work of theater addressing the negative connotations of *Freiheit* or freedom, for example the moral chaos arising, among other things, from indiscipline, random intercourse, miscegenation, intermodulation, nuclear science, and AIDS, illustrated by orgies of stuffed toys. Underlying the ensuing discussion may have been the unspoken question “is this the best art can do in the face of urban jihad?”—a Sphinxlike conundrum to which, perhaps, the composer ultimately had no answer.

Walter Benjamin had argued in 1936 that humanity had become alienated to a point where “it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.” In a posthumous collection of essays on the aesthetics of art Benjamin’s Frankfurt School associate Theodor Adorno surmises “it is conceivable that what we now need are works of art which consume themselves through the temporality at their heart, offering their own life to the moment of truth’s appearance and then vanishing without a trace while remaining completely undiminished in the process. The nobility of such an attitude would not be unworthy of art.” Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* tr. ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Cited by Larson Powell, “The Technological Subject: Music, Media and Memory in Stockhausen’s *Hymnen*.” In Nora M. Alter and Lutz Peter Koepnick ed., *Sound Matters: Essays on the Acoustics of German Culture*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2004, 229.

3. Suzanne Stephens, “Report from Suzanne Stephens to Jim Stonebraker for the Stockhausen Home Page September 29, 2001” (www.stockhausen.org/eyewitness.html.)

4. Breton: “Knut Hamsun ascribes this sort of revelation to which I had been subjected as deriving from *Hunger*, and he may not be wrong. (The fact is I did not eat every day during that period of my life). . . . All of a sudden I found, quite by chance, beautiful phrases, phrases such as I had never written. . . . Thoughts came to me so rapidly and continued to flow so abundantly that I lost a whole host of delicate details, because my pencil could not keep up with them.” From the 1924 *Surrealist Manifesto*.

(www.screensite.org/courses/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/ManifestoOfSurrealism.htm)

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Stockhausen: “I am trying to find a technique for myself as a composer and interpreter, and for other musicians who work with me, to extend the moment of intuition consciously, so that when I want to, it starts. . . . And those moments of intuitive working must last as long as I want, but then I will have to find a completely new technique of making music. I can’t sit at a table with a pencil and a rubber, sharpen the pencil and write down what is coming from intuition, because intuition has a particular kind of speed, which is by no means congruent with the speed of writing.”

“Intuitive Music” in Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Stockhausen on Music* ed. Robin Maconie. London and New York: Marion Boyars, 2000, 124–25.

5. In *Nazi Cinema* (tr. Gertrud Mander and David Wilson. London: Secker & Warburg, 1974) Erwin Leiser draws attention to the theme of sacrifice in German movies of the 1930s, and the extent to which the passions of nationalism and self-annihilation—a will for transcendence to the extent of seeking glory by death at any cost, however pointless—were already embedded in the German character and available for cooption by the Third Reich as part of its strategy for supremacy. For a rehabilitated Germany in the twenty-first century, reeling from the events of 9/11, the moral dilemma would be compounded by a frisson of recognition of the same themes reemerging in the new age of jihad, along with a realization that for the jihadists, the doctrine of personal annihilation for the greater good had been elevated beyond abstract transcendence to an effective and rational political strategy.

One wonders if the doctrine of transcendence were to have arisen not just from a morbid attention to the gruesome and tortured aspect of Christian sacrifice as depicted (say) in the Isenheim Crucifixion of Matthias Grünewald, but from the literal interpretation of ancient history. To read the life of Achilles literally is to see it as short, brutish, and meaningless; construed symbolically, on the other hand, it is a myth about strength and weakness in the abstract. The death of Hector at the hands of Achilles, and his corpse being dragged through the streets by his heels, is the story not of a real person but of what happens when the string, the power source of the bow, is stretched beyond its limits, and snaps, or is severed, to leave a useless thread dangling and dragging along the ground.

R. W. Livingstone, *The Pageant of Greece*. Abridged. Oxford and London: Clarendon Press, 1925, 40–42.

German nationalism in the nineteenth century relied on literacy, obliging the leaders of public education to invent literal explanations for oral texts the meanings of which had been lost, or were too abstruse, or scientific, or beyond the competence, of a common people whose enforced allegiance to government-imposed standards of morality was already intended to disconnect them from local traditions and loyalties. Hence the emphasis on total obedience and meaningless sacrifice as virtues, along with its discreditable aftermath, the Nuremberg defense that one was only following orders. Persuaded by German romantic idealism, the English empire was drawn into the same perversely literal doctrine of individual sacrifice in the service of political power, and with similarly grievous results. The present conflict in the Middle East, and the events of 9/11 as an outcome, could suddenly be seen as awful continuation of a policy for which the western alliance was ultimately responsible.

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6. Ian Rodger, *Radio Drama*. London: Macmillan, 1982, 97–108.

7. Irving Wardle, “Exclusive lines under the desert stars”. *The Times* of London, 12 September 1972. In Robin Maconie, *Other Planets: The Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen*. Lanham MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2005, 423–24.

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corrected 16 February 2009