

# *Where conductors fear to tread*

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The chorus of recycled citations accompanying press obsequies of Karlheinz Stockhausen, who died unexpectedly on 5 December, 2007, hardly compensated for a general lack of information about the composer's musical achievements. One was the composer's description of himself as a being from the Sirius star system; a second, his alleged description of the events of 9/11 as a work of art, and a third, a remark attributed to conductor Sir Thomas Beecham in the fifties, that he was unsure whether he had heard any of Stockhausen's music, but might have trodden in some. The extraordinary virulence of the press response to the passing of a composer of enormous stature and influence—as significant as Beethoven, and certainly as influential as Wagner—says a great deal about a recent history of paranoia and oppression in the West toward oral cultures, including gipsies and underclasses, along with contemporary western “art” music. That in addition, major figures in the contemporary music world also conspicuously declined to endorse the composer in the latter part of his life, or even in death, is not only sad and unintelligent, but professionally disreputable.

When Stockhausen said “I am from Sirius” what he meant was “I am completely *serious*”—with the rider “if you don't think I am serious, it is because we live in different worlds”. It was wordplay elevated to reality addressed to a literate culture obsessed with the idea that words alone correspond to reality.(1) An adolescent survivor of phosphor bombs dropped in 1945 on American troops on a western front already overwhelmed by the Allies, Stockhausen first wanted to be a poet, then studied philosophy before taking up music as a career in 1950.

In 2001, speaking off the record to a German correspondent at a Hamburg press conference five days after 9/11, the composer defined the assault on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon as a work of art. His remark was leaked, misinterpreted as endorsement of the motives of the attackers, and led to his immediate expulsion—without redress, and at great cost to the composer—from a Hamburg Music Festival no doubt already financially compromised by the attack. It was as though a mere musician and entertainer had no right to characterize a military operation as a work of art, even though by this time the Kent Brockmans of US television and a host of retired top brass from the US military were

already animatedly discussing the attack—and its effect on their ratings—as a manifestation of the changing art of war, and have continued to do so ever since. The notion, even now widespread in the US, that it is not permissible for certain classes of society—including poets and composers—to speak about art and war in the same sentence, has serious moral and cultural implications. When I pointed out, in a recent article for a New York periodical, that 9/11 could also be construed as a surgical strike, indeed one of the most perfectly contained wars of modern times, the sentence was summarily deleted.

No less misconstrued is the quip of Sir Thomas Beecham, acclaimed wit and a fine conductor of the classics, but a person born in England in 1879, in the era of the horse and carriage, who could hardly be expected to have an opinion, say, of *Gruppen*. The pejorative imputation of Beecham's aside is demeaning to both. Beecham was no reactionary. In the early years of the twentieth century he respected Henry Wood's advocacy of Schoenberg and considered Stravinsky's ballet *Petrouchka* a work of genius, in 1913 making his Aldwych premises available for rehearsals for the London premiere of *The Rite of Spring*, a work he admired even though he did not understand it. Beecham knew his limitations as a conductor. To those acquainted with him, the implication of such a remark would be "this is something I don't choose to get involved in, but it is a product of natural digestion and the sort of thing others will see as having value for fertilizing the soil of musical culture".

An even more pitiful recent exchange between the veteran composer and a wet behind the ears BBC interviewer is still doing the rounds on the internet:

BBC interviewer: "Do you have a favourite sound?"

Stockhausen: (long pause) "No".

A major obstacle to intelligent discussion of Stockhausen's music in recent years, but one of particular interest to readers of *PN Review*, is the composer's long and deliberate engagement with what others call nonsense, but poets understand as a metalanguage otherwise known as the music of speech. For Stockhausen the involvement began when he was enrolled in a course in information theory at Bonn University in the mid-fifties, and inducted into the science of speech recognition and deconstruction, knowledge to emerge in the early electronic masterpiece *Gesang der Jünglinge*, a parable of Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace in which the calm sound of a boy's singing voice praising God condenses out of a plasma of disconnected syllables. The deconstruction of language was not a new idea, but took on new force in the radio era and was taken very seriously by information scientists such as John von Neumann. The art of reducing continuous speech to individual words or syllables drawn from a hat influenced Dadaist poets such as Tristan Tzara between the wars, and after 1945, writers Raymond Queneau (*Exercices de Style*), Jean Cocteau (the enigmatic radio

intelligence messages in the movie *Orphée*), the cut-ups of William Burroughs, and eventually the mesostics of composer John Cage, who applied randomization techniques not only to music, but also with interesting and possibly ironic effect to authors including Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Codemaking can be defined as the application of reversible mathematical procedures to the randomization of a text. In music, the equivalent process is called serialism, a development of a method devised by Arnold Schoenberg in the 1920s in which every aspect of the music can be referred back to an initial generative configuration of notes. In the more distant past, similar permutational structures are to be found in the English practice of change-ringing, in magic squares such as SATOR/AREPO/TENET/OPERA/ROTAS (a favourite of composer Anton von Webern), and the Proteus poems of the fifteenth-century polymath Julius Caesar Scaliger, for example *Sit pax da pacis tu rex peto tempore nostro*, and the seventeenth-century *Wechselsätze* of Georg Philipp Harsdörffer.<sup>(2)</sup> In the opera cycle *LICHT* (Light) speech and word-association constructions are associated with Lucifer, knowledge and betrayal; in a solo from the scene “Scents-Signs” from *Sunday from LIGHT*, composed in 2002, Lucifer announces his return from limbo with the stuttering sequence “Rot–Rud–Dud–Blut–Glut–Wut–Tot” etc. in a clear homage to Harsdörffer.

There is of course a comic side to wordplay, from children’s riddles to magic and the amiable nonsense of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, partly influenced by the (then) new medium of phonograph recording, and partly by the cultivation of pronunciation as an art of spelling and new letter-signs, started by Benjamin Franklin, taken to a bizarre extreme by Henry Sweet, and parodied by George Bernard Shaw in *Pygmalion*.<sup>(3)</sup> A more serious thread of classical and romantic wordplay leads from Lawrence Sterne and the memory exercises of Samuel Foote (author of “So she went into the garden to cut a cabbage leaf to make an apple pie. . .”) and nonsense syllable strings of German scientist Hermann Ebbinghaus, via the dislocated phraseology of Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés* and Marinetti’s *Zang–Tumb–Tuumb!*, Paris based expatriates Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett, scat singers of New York, and (my own favourite) the fabulous *Ur-Sonate* of Kurt Schwitters, to the concrete poets of more recent date, among them Helmut Heissenbüttel, whose *Simple Grammatical Meditations* are woven into the electronically modulated fabric of Stockhausen’s *Mikrophonie II*, a work characterized by those near the composer as a lighthearted romp, but to me a bleak evocation of despair.

At the heart of this culture of deconstructed speech is a significant and serious concern for where language comes from and how it conveys meaning. It goes back to the seventeenth-century debate between rhetoric and science, to whether the sounds of speech

are more or less meaningful than the messages contained in the text, or whether they are simply different meanings. It can be found lurking behind the classical façade of Alexander Pope’s famous verse, set to music by Handel,

*Where e’er you walk*                      *Cool gales shall fan the glade*  
*Trees where you sit*                      *Shall crowd into a shade*

—lines which in their musical setting are rendered as concrete poetry, alternating phrases of undulating vowels and crisp descending consonants:

OUE AE IOU AU . . . (k)              K G SH F ZH GL . . . D  
(tr)OUEE (z)OUE IOU (s)EE . . . (t)      SH K D T SH . . . D

The debate is ongoing. Poets are a part of it. Stockhausen’s particular focus on the hidden dimensions of speech, which are primarily musical, is of especial interest in identifying the convergence of information science and art, and contemporary revival of a poetic of abstract speech sounds, with the introduction of tape recording around 1950, and the medium’s stark revelation of layers of suffering and nuanced emotion in the casual and incoherent vocalizations of humanity in the raw.

#### *Notes*

1. The blogs ran hot after publication in 2005 of my *Other Planets*, with excitable debate, among other things, over Stockhausen’s pronunciation of “Sirius” and whether it really sounded the same as “serious” in English. (It did.) Another correspondent recommended the views of an author of a two-volume survey, of which only the first had been published, over anything he thought I might have to say, prompting the rejoinder “This is a person who prefers a book that is not yet written over one he has not read. How very German”. See Robin Maconie, *Other Planets: The Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen*. Lanham MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2005, 161–63.
2. Christian Wagenknecht, “Proteus und Permutation: Spielarten einer poetischen Spielart”. *Texte+Kritik* 30 (Konkrete Poesie II: October 1975), 1–10.
3. Robin Maconie, “Mouth Music”. *The Second Sense: Language, Music, and Hearing*. Lanham MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2002, 251–64.