

On Karlheinz Stockhausen

ROBIN MACONIE interviewed by EVA RADICH
for Radio New Zealand Concert “Upbeat”
broadcast 20 December 2007

ER: *Stockhausen was born in Germany seventy-nine years ago. What sort of period was that to be born into?*

RM: Germany was suffering terribly after the First World War as a result of economic and other sanctions imposed by the Allies. At the same time, public radio had come into being in Britain in 1924, and was becoming established in Germany when he was born, so the young Stockhausen grew up in a time that was very difficult for Germany as a whole, and also a time of sinister change within Europe, and particularly within Germany.

ER: *His family also suffered quite severely: his mother I understand had some sort of breakdown and was in fact put into a mental home. Can you tell us what happened?*

RM: His mother was a sensitive soul; I think that Stockhausen said that he got his musicality mainly from her, though his father as a teacher had to have some musical training and played the violin, but not very well. His mother did suffer some form of nervous breakdown when he was quite young, and was taken to a sanatorium. Some years later, when the going in Germany got really tough, she was euthanized. It sounds terrible, but that was government policy. It was decided that there was no value left in her life, and her hospital bed was needed for war casualties. That is how Stockhausen himself explained it.

ER: *Did he ever reveal, in his writings or anywhere else, how he felt as a child to be deprived of his mother in such a cruel way?*

RM: He was asked about this, and he said he felt no particular emotion. What happened to his parents is something of a key to his character, because his father also died, shot on the eastern front toward the end of the war. Because he was the only child and his parents suffered in this way, he didn't bond with them in what we would consider to be a normal manner, and grew up as an autonomous individual who had to find his own way in the world. That experience affected his relations with other people.

ER: *I guess it may also have contributed in a positive way to his development as an intellect, since being thrown so completely on your own devices means that you either sink or swim.*

RM: What I found fascinating from talking to him was the extent to which he identified with the artists and poets he admired, talking about them in metaphorical terms. He contributed a Foreword to the first edition of my *Works of Karlheinz Stockhausen*, published in 1976, in which he said in effect, Am I just one person, or am I also the embodiment of all these other past existences? He would identify with a painter like Max Ernst as with another version of himself: it was his way I think both of expressing an affinity with their art, and also something much stronger than that, he actually felt that their art was in some way speaking of him.

ER: *Would this have to do with his idea of the artist being a medium?*

RM: Certainly. There is a wonderful quotation reproduced in the Introduction to *Other Planets* and available in another version online, in which he says the physical “me” is not important, and in fact when you talk of “my” music, you are not talking about “me” as a person, at all; what you are really doing is identifying aspects of yourself that you recognize in “my” music. The real “me”, the physical being, is of no account.

ER: *An interesting remark coming from such a singular person. He is trying to say “it’s not me that is important, it is me as part of a greater artistic vision.”*

RM: He was also a philosopher. After the war ended he went to the University of Cologne and studied philosophy for a couple of years. When you study philosophy in Germany you study a very particular kind of philosophy. What he is referring to here, I think, is the Platonic doctrine of essences, that is to say, in a universe of ideal types and possibilities any one person or individual, or circumstance, is simply a trivial example, and not a perfect example. And he was always striving for perfection, which of course transcends anything an individual can be or do.

ER: *So he wasn’t an egotistical person in that sense, though he did have a very charismatic personality, which I suppose is the other side of him.*

RM: It made him a very difficult person for some people to deal with: he could be very domineering, but it wasn’t “him” being domineering, it was the strength of the idea that he was administering that was the dominating element. He felt himself very much to be, not so much a prisoner, as the executant of a higher force that was working through him. And if you think that sounds odd, Beethoven expressed himself in exactly the same terms. In the 1820s, when electricity was a very new discovery, Beethoven spoke about his inspiration in terms of electrical (that is, lifegiving) forces working through him.

ER: *I imagine that postwar Germany or Europe in the 1950s must have been filled with feelings of desolation at man’s inhumanity to man, and the traumatic experiences that people had been through. Was that the reason, do you now think, for such a strong tendency among composers to establish a new kind of music?*

RM: It is an interesting question that can be taken in two ways. First there is the Boulez attitude of a break with the past: “Schoenberg is dead”—the idea that music from the past is imbued with the spirit of tyrannical nationalism that led nations to fight one another rather than work productively together. In this sense the new music would be in an international style, it was going to be based on science, and express socialist and peaceful values. Then there is the situation in Germany itself, which had been laid waste for the second time in forty years, and was in very dire straits. I have been rereading Fred Page’s memoirs, in which he recalls visiting Germany in the mid-fifties and discovering much of Berlin still in ruins, and many casualties in the streets, people who had lost a leg, or an eye, or were crippled. And yet, he says, he sensed a vibrancy in the air, the sense of a community coming together and rebuilding. Fred (who was my professor of music at Victoria University in the early sixties and encouraged my interest in this music) was an acute observer. Later, when I came to Cologne in 1964 through 1965, there were still bombed out areas in the inner city, and war damaged churches still being restored, and even at that late date I had a sense of the spirit of renewal that Fred had been aware of, and of music as playing an important part in that renewal. It was a moral motivation to make music, and also to create a new music.

ER: *To create a music that better reflected reality, rather than building on the romantic repertoire of the previous century?*

RM: That's an interesting way of putting it, because in another sense you could say that it was the romantic movement, with its emphasis on representation and emotion and giving the people what they wanted to hear, that was at fault. The new music after the war embraced a new kind of intellectualism which was beyond all of that individual emotion, and taste, and national sentiment, but at the same time could be very exciting as well.

ER: *So what was your view? You have talked about being in Germany in the 1960s: did you go there to study?*

RM: Yes indeed. I went first to France, and studied with Messiaen, and then it was logical that I go on to Cologne. I had a scholarship to study with Stockhausen, and also with Bernd-Alois Zimmermann who was teaching at the Musikhochschule, the Cologne School of Music, where Stockhausen had first studied music. So I was exposed at one and the same time to the semi-conservative establishment and also to the radical new establishment.

ER: *It must have been a most exciting time to be a student.*

RM: Oh my gosh, you have no idea. I had two years of the most exciting time of my entire life. Being in the same room with people like Christoph Caskel, the percussionist, and pianist Aloys Kontarsky, and even taking a few lessons with these people. Or watching Siegfried Palm playing the most horrendously difficult cello music imaginable, and bringing it off with a great deal of flair, and care and attention. It was very exciting, in a way that is difficult to explain.

ER: *You would have had to be there to appreciate it. And I wonder if that is part of the reason for what is seen as the problem of Stockhausen, that unless you were there, and knew the personality, you don't get anything out of the music. Or perhaps it simply means that you just have to do a bit more work, to study to find out what the music is all about.*

RM: You can't really get to like any music until you start to listen to it. And once you start to listen to it you may in fact discover that you like it. But the important thing is that liking the music immediately is not the primary issue: the important matter is that your attention should be arrested by the music, that you should be moved by it in some way. Most people, to be honest, who encounter art that is offensive to them, or that makes them feel uncomfortable, will interpret their reaction as one of disliking it. It is the same for music as well. I have always told my students that it is not whether you feel against it or for it that is important, it is the strength of the feeling that is important. I think it is a natural reaction for people to interpret a strong response as a negative response, when in fact it is simply a strong response, which means that whatever it is that has caused the response has been able to do so because it has touched you deeply in certain places, for reasons that you then have to work out for yourself. But in Stockhausen's case, the music itself is totally fabulous: we just don't hear enough of it.

ER: *Let's go back to the 1950s, and Stockhausen's first works. He was successful from early in his career, to have only been composing for a small number of years and have Gruppen for three orchestras performed and recorded, which is extraordinary for a composer still in his twenties.*

RM: You have to understand the huge political and social apparatus in place in Germany

at the time. After the war, the Americans and the British came into Germany to reorganize broadcasting and re-establish a way of life that was relatively stable. They were advised by psychologists and others that culture and art, and music, should be promoted as a way of lifting the morale of the country, and at the same time they were also able to tap in to the fact that there were a number of different radio communities within Germany who were traditional rivals, representing different provinces, and each having its own orchestra. So a rivalry built up between these groups within Germany, as to who could create the wildest and most novel-sounding new music. At the same time, there was huge investment in promoting new art, and this investment was in part politically motivated, because new art, and especially avant-garde art and music, was seen as an antidote to communism, or government-controlled art, in the time of the Cold War: a way of demonstrating to those on the other side of the Iron Curtain that the West was now free, that artists and the people were able to express themselves completely freely. That freedom, for those still living under oppression, was embodied in the wildest excesses of modern art.

ER: *What do you think it was about Stockhausen's personality, if not his music, that made orchestras like the Berlin Philharmonic want to buy into it to such an extent?*

RM: Musicians were excited by this music as well, but orchestras in those days did what they were told. It was only during the sixties that the situation began to change, and the orchestras themselves began to rebel and ask for a quieter and easier life. You also need to bear in mind the way these institutions are funded. If an orchestra is funded by the state, or a state organization like the BBC, then the state can afford, for prestige and cultural reasons, to subsidize performances which take a lot more rehearsing, and involve a lot more learning, than the conventional repertoire. If on the other hand an orchestra has to pay its own way, then the easiest way for it to do so is to play music that everyone wants to hear and for which audiences are prepared to pay.

ER: *So Stockhausen was lucky in being born in Germany and being in the right place post-war when so much investment was being poured into the arts?*

RM: Yes, but you have to give credit to the German people themselves, who were prepared to listen to this music even when they disliked it intensely.

ER: *What would have been the early public reaction to a work like Gruppen, or to Carré for four orchestras?*

RM: Much the same reaction you might expect in New Zealand, but on a larger scale. There are always people who see the value of venturing into uncharted areas: even the musicians themselves, though they may not have liked *Gruppen* or *Momente*, would still tell you afterwards that the experience of rehearsing and performing such works was useful to them from a practical point of view. And that experience would be entered proudly in their career history as a professional asset.

ER: *Because it sharpens the mind?*

RM: Yes indeed. In New Zealand we are still not aware to the same extent that if you are exposed to music that is in any way difficult, the experience can actually help to rewire your brain, to put it crudely. The mere business of trying to get your head around new music actually improves your performance intellectually in a whole host of different ways, since when you are listening to music so much more of the brain is involved than if for instance you were reading a book or watching television.

ER: *Can we talk now in more detail about the 1960s and the birth of electronic music, since Stockhausen was one of those at the forefront of this movement. Why do you think he became so interested in electronic music in the first place?*

RM: The origins of electronic music can be traced back to the nineteenth century, and by the time Stockhausen became involved, had moved into the age of tape recording. Germany had the franchise on magnetic tape, because Germany invented the technology in the thirties. Now with tape as your medium rather than disc, the composer could (a) get a cleaner musical result, and (b) attempt much more complicated manipulations. The impulse driving electronic music in Cologne was to synthesize sounds rather than play with prerecorded material, and ideally to synthesize sounds corresponding to human speech. It was a scientific objective into which musicians were drawn because they had better ears than the average scientist. That is how it came about that Stockhausen's and Berio's early tape compositions are experiments in electronic simulation or analysis of the human voice.

ER: *And this was partly to do with efforts to develop automatic and instant translation technology for the United Nations.*

RM: Exactly, voice recognition and translation software, which are still ongoing issues in communications science. However, the same research and technology could also be applied to covert surveillance. There was a lot of money being invested in this area of research, though most of the composers who were innocently drawn into it were completely unaware of its more sinister implications.

ER: *Was Stockhausen aware of what was happening in a political sense, or its application to espionage, which I suppose is what we are really talking about?*

RM: I don't think so. I think that had composers been aware of these associations, it would have offended them terribly. In Stockhausen's case, certainly he pursued his musical researches in a very singleminded way, and developed his own philosophy to give it meaning, a philosophy in which it is impossible to detect any taint of nationalism.

ER: *So what was it then about the new technology that drew him in to such an extent that, as I understand it, he would spend hours and hours in the studio, recording sounds, superimposing them, slowing them down, and cutting and splicing them on tape to produce a finished work?*

RM: When you realize how relatively primitive the equipment was, it becomes understandable how much time it took to achieve what he did. All credit to Stockhausen, I think, for having had the determination, which is a uniquely powerful determination, to stick with it. In the nineteenth century Hermann Helmholtz, the great German acoustician, tried to experiment and develop techniques for synthesizing the human voice, and he used little round glass resonators that you blow across, along with sirens that you turn by hand, the tone quality of which could be modified in a very limited way, to produce sounds that approximated one vowel or another. By the tape era in the 1950s, the medium had changed, but the procedures remained very much the same, of building up specific tone qualities by superimposing one pure tone upon another, as in an organ, where the organist gradually pulls out the stops and the sound remains at the same pitch but the timbre gets progressively richer. But Stockhausen was doing all of this by hand, not mechanically at all: it was a long time before synthesizers as we understand them came on to the market.

ER: *What about humour? You have written about humour in his music. Did that start to emerge at an early stage?*

RM: Oh yes: there is an early piece, one of the *Drei Lieder* of 1951, about Harlequin, a jester performing in front of the king and his court. It's a strange little poem that Stockhausen wrote himself, and I don't know of anybody else getting the joke until I put two and two together a few years ago. In the song the court jester is handed a knotted rope, and instead of untying the knots, he cuts them off, much to the dismay of the court. One can read it as a paraphrase of the tale of the Gordian knot, but I now think it is a piece of wordplay: the knotted rope or "knot-row" standing for a *note-row* which is pronounced the same way in German. (A knotted string or rope also corresponded in ancient times to a system of measurement, and thus a set of rules of harmony and proportion.) So in effect the joke of the song—and it is a really German joke, one you have to work hard to work out—is the composer saying "I am not going to conform to Schoenberg's system of note-rows, I intend to cut the row and develop a different style of composition. It is a gesture of cutting his ties with Schoenberg and also with the academic establishment represented by the King and his court, who are dumbfounded at the jester's action.

ER: *The composer's sense of humour continued to the end, in one of his last pieces called "Heaven's Door".*

RM: An awareness of approaching death permeates the last compositions. This piece is very touching in a way. Like all of Stockhausen's music, there is an austere, massive, forbidding, hieratic aspect, like a gothic cathedral, but there can also be a comic, human dimension as well, like the grimacing gargoyles tucked away in the nooks and crannies, or peering out from the eaves of the same gothic cathedral. Part of the richness of Stockhausen's legacy is that you can go back to these pieces time and again and interpret them from a different angle, and they tell you something different about him. In the case of *Himmels-Tür*, "Heaven's Door", this is a work essentially for a percussionist and a specially-built door, with panels that resonate at different pitches like a marimbaphone. Visually an audience has the impression of a percussionist banging on a door, a little like the tam-tam player at the beginning of an old J. Arthur Rank movie. Stockhausen was very impressed as a child by the tam-tam action that introduces these British movies. Just as the tam-tam is interpreted as a magical opening to a dream world of the movies, imagined as a higher or ideal reality, so in this work the door (which is constructed to resemble the door of a gothic church) is to be understood as the portal through which the virtuous musician can pass to a higher and idealized existence.

ER: *But isn't it also about him as a four year-old going round the house with a little toy hammer, knocking on doors to hear what they sounded like?*

RM: That's true: as a child he would wander around the house, tapping on different panels of the doors with his little hammer, as well as on cupboards and table edges, listening to the different sounds they made. The music in that sense is about his formation as a musician. But at the same time one cannot avoid the obvious allusion to the Bob Dylan song "Knock, knock, knocking on heaven's door" evoking the sixties, which was a happy time for him. And there is another more distant allusion which I don't think even his closest associates have grasped, to the American composer Harry Partch. Partch created a range of new instruments out of recycled materials, including light bulbs. One of these instruments is called the "marimba heroica" and it consists of a set of wooden panels which vibrate, when hit, at pitches so low in frequency they are virtually inaudible. In his book *Genesis of a Music* Partch writes about an idea he had of creating a staircase of similar panels to connect

the upper and lower floors of his house, so that when he got up in the morning he could bound downstairs for a glass of yogurt and his footsteps would make music at the same time, and by varying his steps from one day to the next, he could make different melodies. There is a hint of that in Stockhausen's heavenly door, I think, as well.

ER: *Stockhausen would have loved the idea of a musical staircase.*

RM: I think so.

ER: *So what sort of person was he, in terms of your own experience and interactions with him?*

RM: He could be extremely gentle, and he could also be extremely fierce. My relationship with him was not combative, but I stood up to him because I thought he needed somebody to stand up to him, somebody who would also put up with him and stand by him. The whole point of my embarking on *The Works of Karlheinz Stockhausen* in the 1970s, was the challenge of making sense of his music as a whole, since it was already being written off as a series of works that were completely different one from another, with no underlying unity of procedure or goal. I have a feeling that Stockhausen himself might have had a part in creating such an impression. My purpose then was first of all to demonstrate *to myself* that the music made sense as a coherent and evolving body of work, and find out in what ways the music made sense, and was consistent. What made the task interesting was that I corresponded continuously with Stockhausen at this time, from 1972 to 1974 (the first edition being eventually published in 1976), and he seemed totally fascinated that anybody would dare to take on such a task. Perhaps he had never thought of himself in quite these terms. For me, the opportunity to present an overview of the composer's history and suggest how his music might develop further, when the composer was in mid-career and at the height of his powers, was too good to miss, something I had to attempt. I cannot say what effect it might have had on Stockhausen's development, though perhaps it is worth noting that he embarked on the *LICHT* project the year after publication, 1977. Our relationship from that time had its ups and downs, but I think Stockhausen understood that my affection was abiding and real, and accepted that a relationship in which there is tension and resistance is also one in which the best vibration results.

ER: *Do you think that in the latter period of his life, in which he fell from grace, so to say, he ever lost faith, because his music did become more and more obscure. I'm thinking in particular about the opera cycle LICHT, to which he devoted so much of his life. Was this his way of seeking refuge from the world?*

RM: In one sense he had had enough of his work and his ideas being abused in the media and in the press. He wanted to work in a less hostile environment, not completely as an anchorite, but as a hermit doing his own thing. And even while he was working in isolation, his house was still open to young students who came to visit. He was exceptionally generous with his time. So it wasn't as though he had shut himself off from the rest of society.

ER: *In his last correspondence with you he said he had a lot of projects and performances planned in the coming year, and that all of his recent concerts had been sold out.*

RM: His music continued to attract audiences from all over Europe. We tend to forget that western Europe is not all that big territorially, so if a concert were given in Prague, or Paris, or Barcelona, people would jump on a plane and go there. He was drawing on a very large

pool of enthusiasm in Europe in a way that composers in remoter parts of the world such as New Zealand would not be able to match.

ER: *I know you have ideas of ways in which his music could be performed here in New Zealand.*

RM: I said in an article in 2005 that it would be marvellous to perform Stockhausen's works and film the performances on location in iconic parts of this country. New Zealand has an extraordinary landscape that cries out for musical statements of a matching grandeur: all we need to do is decide to do it. We also need to learn how to perform the music, but that is what I am here for. I certainly hope that the idea of performing Stockhausen's music in a New Zealand setting would appeal to New Zealanders, because I think we would recognize and understand a pioneering spirit in the music that resonates with the sense of being New Zealanders at the other end of the world, a nation of doers who persist and achieve things, and don't give up.

ER: *Looking ahead a hundred years, how do you think Stockhausen will be remembered?*

RM: He will be remembered as Beethoven is remembered, and as I hope Schoenberg will be remembered, and Webern. We have a terrible legacy of neglect and denial to get over, not just in New Zealand, but in Europe and America as well. The challenge for the twenty-first century is to set aside the conservatism that has stifled musical understanding for the past 150 years, and get back to basics, and just learn to listen to music again. And once we have learned how to listen with fresh ears, to learn how to perform it, because this music involves a degree of mental concentration and technique that is of benefit not just to performers but to listeners as well.

Edited January 09, 2008

Corrected 10 January 2008