

## Why Stockhausen matters

ROBIN MACONIE

Stockhausen turned 77 this August. The number seven has mystical significance. In 1977, at the age of 49 (7 x 7), the composer embarked on a monumental cycle of seven operas or musical mystery plays, one for each day of the week, under the overall title LIGHT. The meaning of these operas, individually and in total, has defied explanation for over a quarter-century. The project began a year after my first study of his music was published in 1976. Until then the composer had enjoyed the reputation of being the world's most formidably intellectual and unfathomable musical genius. Genius he certainly was (and still is). A pioneer of electronic music, he has been creating masterpieces in four- and five-channel surround sound from the mid-fifties, music still impossible to broadcast effectively today. His music impressed and influenced Stravinsky in the fifties, the Beatles and Kraftwerk in the sixties, Michael Tippett in the seventies, and continues to resonate in sci-fi and psychodrama movies like *The Matrix* in the present. In 1972, living in London as a freelance, I was asked out of the blue if I would consider writing an introduction to Stockhausen as part of an Oxford series of short studies on modern composers. The project grew into a much larger volume, mostly because the composer's habit of changing style and terms of reference from work to work made a summary treatment impossible. The challenge was to expose hidden links and continuities showing that the music actually followed a consistent pattern of development that could be picked up by any intelligent listener. Stockhausen himself became an intrigued collaborator, providing not only advice and documentation, including handwritten corrections (often scathing, but always fair) to my working typescript, but even, in a generous foreword to the first edition, admitting that I might have a point. "Let no one suppose (he said) that the composer may be better able to interpret the musical vibrations transmitted through him, than a commentator who immerses himself, body and soul, in this music."

That almost immediately afterward he started on the opera project might be no more than historical coincidence, even while succeeding as a calculated move to avoid further intrusive scrutiny. In 1990 I published a second edition: the underlying meaning of the new operas was proving impossible to grasp, the composer resorting meantime to oracular and enigmatic statements seemingly designed to add to public confusion about his dramatic and musical intentions. The breakthrough for me came in 1998, during preparation of a talk on *Hymnen*, an electronic montage of national anthems, to mark the composer's 70th birthday (that magic number again). I unearthed a connection between the work of the Cologne electronic music studio and the research aims of information scientists at

MIT. People like Max Mathews (and our own Barry Vercoe) whose studies in computer modelling of music formed part of a larger inquiry into linguistic "deep structure" and speech recognition protocols. (For those interested, the text "Stockhausen at 70" can be accessed online, and is published in the summer 1998 edition of the *Musical Times*.)

In my new survey *Other Planets: The Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen* published this year, enough of the code of the seven operas has been unlocked to intrigue the composer's many fans worldwide and hopefully to provoke a surge of interest in the music of the post-1950 avantgarde and its social and historical context. Does it matter? On a trivial level, it matters to me as much as Everest to Sir Ed Hillary, or reaching the moon to President Kennedy, who said, rather more tactfully, "We choose to do this . . . not because it is easy, but because it is hard." If it means that more people will be encouraged to study, perform, and listen to this music, so much the better.

But New Zealand is now attempting to position itself as a music provider in the world community. This raises the critical issue of how a dependency culture about as far away from Europe as it is possible to get, can realistically aspire to international status in any aspect of music. For me there are two possibilities. The market for our existing classical music expertise is likely to be Asia rather than Europe. For westernized China, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, and South Korea, European classical music is the music of aspiration. And while we may not be able to compete with the artistic and intellectual resources of New York, London, or Vienna, other areas of excellence we can realistically aspire to are contemporary music, electronic music, and computer music, expertise that is thin on the ground elsewhere in the world. Imagine developing music software to the level that Weta has achieved in computer animation. It can be done. Classical music is as natural a part of the New Zealand lifestyle as clean air and intelligent food, but to bring our music up to the same level as our taste in pinot noir, cheese, or olive oil requires not only the raw performing talent we have in abundance, but also appropriate packaging, marketing, and technological skills.

Fred Page, my old mentor at Victoria University, used to tell a nice story of catching up with Pierre Boulez in Europe after a concert of entrancingly strange avantgarde music. How did one begin to perform such music in New Zealand, he wanted to know. Boulez's reply was stunningly simple: *Monsieur, vous commencez*. You just do it. And he did. Somewhere deep in the vaults of Concert FM I like to think there is a 1962 tape of Fred giving the first broadcast performance in the southern hemisphere of Stockhausen's formidable *Piano Piece XI*, a composition of fragments scattered across one vast page that the player mixes in a new sequence at every performance. The test of great music, like great wine, is that when young it is loaded with raw tannin, and undrinkable; but given time that harshness converts to colour, depth and intensity. I first heard *Kontakte* very late one night in 1960, a YC relay direct from Cologne Radio that even in

mono sounded like being in the middle of a raging tornado. Nowadays along with the energy I can also hear tranquillity, pathos, humour, and elegance.

To celebrate his 77th anniversary Stockhausen is paying a visit to London for a performance of two electronic works, the four-track *Kontakte* from 1960 and the electronic music *Oktophonie* of 1991, from the opera *Tuesday from LIGHT*, music for a cubic eight-channel speaker array. Such an event, with the composer in attendance, could just as well be happening in New Zealand. Why not?

Stockhausen has never visited this country and the New Zealand landscape would provide stunning backdrops for performances of his music, live or on film. Imagine hearing *Stimmung* at Milford Sound, *Prozession* in early morning dialogue with the native birds at Mount Bruce, a performance of *Kontakte* in the natural amphitheatre of Mount Eden (with David Guerin on piano), *Saturday Greeting* for massed brass ringing out across Wellington harbour, or *Hymnen* on a summer evening via a massive speaker system set up in the tundra by the Desert Road under the gaze of Mount Ruapehu?

*Robin Maconie* <maconie@xtra.co.nz> studied with Messiaen and Stockhausen in the 1960s. His book *Other Planets: The Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen* is published by *The Scarecrow Press* and may be ordered online at <[www.scarecrowpress.com/ISBN/0810853566](http://www.scarecrowpress.com/ISBN/0810853566)>.