

TWENTIETH-CENTURY ANALYSIS: ESSAYS IN MINIATURE

BY LOTHAR KLEIN

KARLHEINZ STOCKHAUSEN. Very recent musical developments convince us that the music of the future is already with us. To date, this series has addressed itself only to the proven musical greats of our century's first half. What course will music take as we approach the year 2000? These final essays must then be concerned with the present generation of avant-garde composers. Their music is of a highly specialized order and is thus rejected by plush concert establishments. This is unfortunate, for its kinship with the time is beyond question. Listening is normally worth a thousand words, yet a lack of familiarity with this music may prove an essential asset for an intelligent encounter with it. No attempt at prophecy in evaluating this body of work will be made; we will, instead, consider the many questions it raises. The avant-garde's well-chronicled activities are influential, and believing artistic truth is never found in majority opinion, we must soberly examine their position no matter how antic it may seem. By so doing we may be guilty of overly indulgent liberalism, yet this is the only critical process permitting acceptance or damnation of artful activity clamoring for our rapt attention.

Miss Susan Sontag, high priestess of avant-garde anti-criticism, inveighs against such interpretation. Yet, if men will not interpret, they will not learn; passivity invites stupidity. In short, we must remember to engage brain gears when confronting the new and the old.

Every about-face in creative direction has its roots in the real ac-

tion world. Politics, historical perspective, fashions, philosophies, social-psychological phenomena act on the creative artist; this is particularly true today. Current art is the result of an intellectual chess game countering the moves of the real world. No event in recorded history has so shaken this planet as has World War II. Two thousand years of humanistic ideals were powerless against nationalistic bullying and lust. Religions could not stem tides of hate, while the supposed ethical power of great art proved a myth, only to be believed in with childlike innocence. Beethoven's music, the hallowed shrine of a broad humanity symbolizing the divinity of man, was a make-believe altar accessible to every expediency. This failure of religion and art to direct man's moral sense was undoubtedly more keenly felt in Europe than in America. One must sense this feeling of spiritual betrayal, this mockery of appearances and values, to comprehend fully the work of European composers born circa 1925.

By the mid-1950's, three young European composers had ascended the post-war compositional firmament. They were the Frenchman Pierre Boulez (b. 1925), Italy's Luigi Nono (b. 1924), and Germany's Karlheinz Stockhausen (b. 1928). Of this constellation, only the latter's star continues to shine brightly. Nono's musical career succumbed to a passionate interest in Communism (to the extent of running for political office), while Boulez exercises his magnificent gifts as full-time conductor. Originally all three were attracted to

twelve-tone music via the work of Anton Webern. Until 1950 Webern's art was the greatest break with musical tradition known to our century. His music's emotional economy plus its technical affinity with scientific method promised new musical departures eagerly sought after by these men. One also surmises that Webern's total artistic dedication in face of complete ridicule and his tragic death (he was shot and killed while smoking a cigarette after curfew by American occupation troops) make him a martyr genius-hero to many young musicians. As Webern's music departed from the nineteenth-century modernism of Schoenberg, so Stockhausen's early development built on Webern. The output of both men is similar in displaying dissatisfaction with the prevailing musical beliefs of their times. They also embrace a nineteenth-century view of music as an art that must continu-

This article is the ninth in a series of "Essays in Miniature" featuring important musical compositions and developments of the twentieth century. The series includes analyses of works by Schoenberg, Hindemith, Stravinsky, Stockhausen, Cage, and others. The author is Assistant Professor of Theory-Composition, Department of Music, The University of Texas, Austin.

ally make historical progress in order to be authentic. Stockhausen's work, however, makes demands on our sensibilities, stretching perceptions of reality until we must assess what constitutes musical reality.

Born near Cologne, Stockhausen

studied in Paris with Olivier Messiaen, his most notable teacher. University studies of acoustical sciences set Stockhausen apart from the usual pianistically tamed composer; consequently his unique training makes him a visionary of electronic music. Perhaps the influence of Messiaen causes the fusion of Indo-French exoticism and German mysticism in Stockhausen. It is the substitution of color for an audibly recognizable thematic form, a trait of Indian aesthetic contemplation, that depends on mystical perception for interpretation. What is one to think of instances in Stockhausen's works when parchment is crumpled before a microphone or a chorus shuffles its feet as part of the music? Such goings-on are not merely descriptive effects, like automobile tootling in Gershwin's *American in Paris*, but attempts to join sounds of everyday existence with the concertizing of conventional instruments. Sound, in Stockhausen, has no limitations, nor is it confined to musical or non-musical meanings. Despite their precise mechanics and

starry-eyed scientific-philosophical premises, these ineffable qualities in his work question the limits of music functioning as a communicative art, expressive of itself.

Any composer prior to World War II seeking to prove the expressive potential of crumpling parchment would most likely have worked in a well-padded studio. Today the fact remains that some composers and audiences seriously accept the quashing of paper as possessing an intrinsic aesthetic meaning not dissimilar to playing the piano. Something has obviously changed, and this change is symptomatic of our world's changing psyche. All aspects of this situation cannot be considered here. In the main, the difference between old and new music may be determined by what the composer is willing to accept as material fit for music. Thus, listeners now must differentiate between substance (the material to be used in an aesthetic endeavor) and the resulting form; that is, can crumpling paper possess a lyrical quality? Farfetched as such a comparison seems, the sanity

of musical art depends on our answer.

Stockhausen's most successful work to date might be his 1956 electronic realization *Gesang der Jünglinge* ("Song of the Children in the Fiery Furnace"), a montage of vocal, instrumental, and electronic devices. If much of the composer's output is fraught with problems, the *Gesang*, by the power inherent in its conception, evades them. The text, a series of declamations praising God, is taken from the Apocryphal *Book of Daniel*. Each line of the eighteen-line text begins, "Praise the Lord." The composer considers textual meaning subordinate to language-becoming-ritual. Stockhausen accordingly treats the linguistic properties he has discovered within the text (vowels, diphthongs, aspirates, and so on) as raw material for a ritual of composing. A linear version of the text is sung by a twelve-year-old boy, but single speech-song elements are subject to multiple sonic reshaping. Phonetics become abstracted from verbal language and electronically transformed into

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comparable to such momentous periods as the fifteenth century when *Organum* gave way to *ars nova*; the end of the sixteenth century leading to the birth of opera; and, again, the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the declaration of personal independence burst forth as the Romantic movement. Realizing that the story of music is a record of mutations, we should be prepared for the inevitability of change taking place under our own ears, and, furthermore, to understand the normality of present-day trends. Instead of being discouraged at what seems to be shattering of tested musical customs, we should be stimulated, and acknowledge the fact that art grows by adapting itself to its own era.

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pitch vocabulary. A tape recorder is the medium through which this transformation is accomplished. Speech properties and musical elements (pitch, duration, intensity, color, and density) are related through a series of pre-compositioned coordinates and mixed with separate electronic sounds. This blending results in a color-continuum of vocal and electronic sound. Textual comprehensibility is unimportant to Stockhausen, for his basic plan is to make music equal speech and speech equal music. The whole is envisioned as music in the round, which is to be performed through a five-channel stereophonic system in a perfectly rounded concert hall. Other than pencil computations no score exists of this work. The tape is the inalterable end product.

Whatever one may think of Stockhausen's thesis (a criticism might be, if textual comprehensibility is immaterial, why this specific text or any text?), one must marvel at the composer's aural imaginings. He has created a sound-world of limitless dimensions, evok-

ing terror and wonder. Time stands still, and our senses are whirled into ever-varying spatial chasms. More sophisticated electronic music has appeared since 1956 using ever-refined equipment, yet the *Gesang* remains the crucial masterpiece of a genre that may already have had its day.

Electronics is providing composers with an enticing array of techniques and gadgetry. This proliferation of techniques has often become an end in itself, gimcrackery breeding a new type of program music written to illustrate technical theorems. (One is reminded of motorcycle enthusiasts comparing the respective purrs of the Harley-Davidson versus the Honda.) Sensing danger, Stockhausen has lately flirted with inter-media arts, and the "happening" now figures prominently with him. The visual aspect of his ensembles warns us that we are witnessing a throwback to the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Stockhausen's activities stand at a greater distance from the late work of Stravinsky than does the music of Webern

from Mozart. Indeed, the crucial query facing music today is not how will it go on but how can it continue. This is not intended to sound like the enfeebled despair of criticism unable to face change. Newer music today poses questions basic to the sanity of any age. T. S. Eliot has defined the traditional function of Western art as "imposing a credible order on ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality."

Music, too, has its realities. The sound of hammer on nail is recognized as hammering, and if rapid enough, an allusion to the sound of a machine gun can be made. Yet the sound of hammer, Sten gun, and snare drum are realities as different as water and milk. When music—the science or art of pleasing, expressive, or intelligible combinations of tones—abandons tone to exploit noise, a slight-of-hand has occurred. Once this switch of realities is accepted, it will be possible to hear painting and see music. Our doors of perception, our eyes and ears, will then have come off their hinges. ■