

Karlheinz Stockhausen

Advice to clever children...

Article from "The Wire", November 1995

Earlier this year, Radio 3 sent a package of tapes to Karlheinz Stockhausen. The tapes contained music by Aphex Twin, Plasticman, Scanner and Daniel Pemberton. Then in August, the station's reporter Dick Witts travelled to Salzburg to meet Stockhausen and ask him for his opinion on the music of these four "Technocrats". But first, they talked about the German composer's own youthful experiments in electronic synthesis...

DW: When you started as a composer, how different were the conditions from today?

KS: I studied music as a pianist, and learning all the traditional techniques of composing, in an institution called Stadtliche Hofschule für Musik. We had about ten disciplines to study: choir, orchestra, conducting, piano was my main instrument, then musicology, harmony and counterpoint. I wrote several works in traditional styles, but also two works, so-called 'free compositions', one for orchestra and alto voice, a work which is still available on CD called the Drei Lieder. I started composing at the age of 20, 1948, the first time I considered my music to be of some general importance, and they are available, like the violin sonatina...

Why did you consider those works a beginning?

Because everything that could be studied with the professors at the conservatory, the other students also were able to write. So there was nothing special to write a fugue or to write a piece in the style of Hindemith. But it was special to write something different from all other composers. I wrote, for example a small theatre piece, Burleska, together with two colleagues. We divided the piece into three parts. My part did not sound as the newspapers said [of the other two parts] like Orff, or like Hindemith, but different. So I was very proud that they said my section did not sound 'like' something.

I Composed Kreuzspiel, or Crossplay [1951], and I knew when I wrote it that it would sound like nothing else in the world. People were quite upset when they heard it for the first time at the national summer courses for contemporary music in Darmstadt, where I conducted the piece; it was violently interrupted by the public. And since then I have composed works from one to the next, always waiting until I've found something that I had never imagined before, or that sounded like anything existing.

Can you hear a line, a unity, in everything you've written, from Kreuzspiel to Licht?

Many lines; depends on which level. For example, space exploration in music is one line, then sound- and word-relationship is another line, from the beginning until today, then the discovery of polyphony in many-layered composition is another line ; and that is what is essential, the discovery of sounds which are derived from formulas for particular compositions. That goes from the very first electronic studies until my very last works which I have just finished, which I call electronic music with sound-scenes for Friday From Light, which is two hours 25 minutes of music which I work on in the electronic music studio in Cologne. this is another line. Then the development from serial technique to formula technique is again another line. So it depends just where you touch my musical mind, and I will show you how many, many lines are running in parallel and crossing each other constantly in different compositions.

Going back to Kreuzspiel - that was around the time you first started using technology...

Yes. 1952 I started working in the studio for musique concrete, of the French radio. Because I was very intrigued by the possibility to compose one's own sound. I was allowed to work in the studio of Pierre Scaefffer: I made artificial sounds, synthetic sounds, and I composed my first étude: Étude Concrète. At the same time, I was extremely curious, and went to the musée de L'homme in Paris with a tape recorder and microphones, and I recorded all the different instruments of the ethnological department: Indonesian instruments, Japanese instruments, Chinese instruments; less European instruments because I knew them better, but even piano sounds... Then I analysed these sounds one by one, and wrote down the frequencies which I found and the dynamic level of the partials of the spectra, in order to know what the sound is made of, what the sound is, as a matter of fact; what is the difference between a lithophone sound or, let's say, a Thai gong

sound of a certain pitch. And very slowly I discovered the nature of sounds. The idea to analyse sounds gave me the idea synthesize sounds. so then I was looking for synthesizers or the first electronic generators, and I superimposed vibrations in order to compose spectra: timbres. I do this now, still, after 43 years.

Have things got easier for you?

No. really not. The last three weeks I just spent every day in the studio, eight hours, working with a new digital technique with a Capricorn mixing console, the newest one, from Siemens, or the English Nieve Nicam, from Cambridge, and two 24 channel Sony tape recorders, one being the leader and one running in slave, in order to make very special movements in space... And I must tell you that out of eight hours per day I waited seven hours without any result, because the technicians, sound engineers, didn't know how to deal with these instruments, and had never encountered problems which I had imposed. So it is becoming more difficult for me.

I wonder to what extent your fascination with technology helps you as a composer, and to what extent your frustration with it helps you?

[Tragic] I don't know how to go on. No matter how difficult it is. Very often I am quite desperate.

You say your music speaks of the essential unity of the universe; I wonder how you came to this realisation, and how it speaks through the music?

Well, I didn't come to it. That is the oldest tradition of all music styles, music cultures on this planet. The beginning of every art music development, in China, or in India or in European monasteries was always to relate the art of shaping composing sounds with the art [by which] the stars are shaped and composed. Astronomy, mathematics and music were the highest disciplines throughout the centuries since the beginning of European art music in the monasteries, let's say in the tenth until the 14th, 15th century... I have studied all music of Europe as a student - I had to - and I at a very early age became aware, also naturally, [that] certain music, like the Art Of The Fuge by Johann Sebastian Bach or the Musikalische Opfer, [has] always known about this relationship between the laws of the universe, astronomical laws, and the laws of the music of this Earth. For example, I admire very much the music of Anton Von Webern, who is practically not known by the large public today. But he studied Senfi, composer of the renaissance, German composer who also knew the isorhythmic Motette, the technique of isorhythms, and

Webern was very, very aware, as a collector of very strange plants, he always went on the mountains, in the Alps, to collect the most beautiful and loneliest plants in the world, and dried them. And his music is like that: he knew that the same laws which ruled the inner life of atoms and galaxies applied to the music. To the art music.

Can we talk about the music we sent you? It was very good of you to listen to it. I wonder if you could give some advice to these musicians.

I wish those musicians would not allow themselves any repetitions, and would go faster in developing their ideas or their findings, because I don't appreciate at all this permanent repetitive language. It is like someone who is stuttering all the time, and can't get words out of his mouth. I think musicians should have very concise figures and not rely on this fashionable psychology. I don't like psychology whatsoever: using music like a drug is stupid. One shouldn't do that : music is the product of the highest human intelligence, and of the best senses, the listening senses and of imagination and intuition. And as soon as it becomes just a means for ambience, as we say, environment, or for being used for certain purposes, then music becomes a whore, and one should not allow that really; one should not serve any existing demands or in particular not commercial values. That would be terrible: that is selling out the music.

I heard the piece Aphex Twin of Richard James carefully: I think it would be very helpful if he listens to my work Song Of The Youth, which is electronic music, and a young boy's voice singing with himself. Because he would then immediately stop with all these post-African repetitions, and he would look for changing tempi and changing rhythms, and he would not allow to repeat any rhythm if it were varied to some extent and if it did not have a direction in its sequence of variations.

And the other composer - musician, I don't know if they call themselves composers...

They're sometimes called 'sound artists'...

No, 'Technocrats', you called them. He's called Plasticman, and in public, Richie Hawtin. It starts with 30 or 40 - I don't know, I haven't counted them - fifths in parallel, always the same perfect fifths, you see, changing from one to the next, and then comes in hundreds of repetitions of one small section of an African rhythm: duh-duh-dum, etc, and I think it would be helpful if he listened to Cycle for percussion, which is only a 15 minute

long piece of mine for a percussionist, but there he will have a hell to understand the rhythms, and I think he will get a taste for very interesting non-metric and non-periodic rhythms. I know that he wants to have a special effect in dancing bars, or wherever it is, on the public who like to dream away with such repetitions, but he should be very careful, because the public will sell him out immediately for something else, if a new kind of musical drug is on the market. So he should be very careful and separate as soon as possible from the belief in this kind of public.

The other is Robin Rimbaud, Scanner, I've heard, with radio noises. He is very experimental, because he is searching in a realm of sound which is not usually used for music. But I think he should transform more what he finds. He leaves it too much in a raw state. He has a good sense of atmosphere, but he is too repetitive again. So let him listen to my work Hymnen. There are found objects - a lot like he finds with his scanner, you see. But I think he should learn from the art of transformation, so that what you find sounds completely new, as I sometimes say, like an apple on the moon.

Then there's another one: Daniel Pemberton. His work which I heard has noise loops: he likes loops, a loop effect, like in musique concrète, where I worked in 1952, and Pierre Henry and Schaeffer himself, they found some sounds, like say the sounds of a casserole, they made a loop, and then they transposed this loop. So I think he should give up this loop; it is too oldfashioned. Really. He likes train rhythms, and I think when he comes to a soft spot, a quiet, his harmony sounds to my ears like ice cream harmony. It is so kitschy; he should stay away from these ninths and sevenths and tenths in parallel: so, look for a harmony that sounds new and sounds like Pemberton and not like anything else. He should listen to Kontakte, which has among my works the largest scale of harmonic, unusual and very demanding harmonic relationships. I like to tell the musicians that they should learn from works which already gone through a lot of temptations and have refused to give in to these stylistic or to these fashionable temptations...

Portions of this interview were broadcast on Radio 3 in October as part of the Technocrats mini series, which examined Stockhausen's musical legacy. This partially edited transcript is printed here [the WIRE, Nov. 1995] courtesy of Radio 3 and Soundbite Productions. The music which Stockhausen was commenting on included "Ventolin" and "Alberto Balsam" by Aphex Twin, Plasticman's Sheet One album, "Micrographia", "Dimension" and "Discreet" by Scanner, and "Phoenix", Phosphine", Novelty Track" and "Voices" by Daniel Pemberton.

Advice from clever children...

Following Stockhausen's advice to our Technocrats, we decided to play them excerpts from the compositions which the German composer suggested they listen to and learn from. Here's what they had to say...

Aphex Twin on Song Of The Youth

Mental! I've heard that song before; I like it. I didn't agree with him. I thought he should listen to a couple of tracks of mine: "Didgeridoo", then he'd stop making abstract, random patterns you can't dance to. Do you reckon he can dance? You could dance to Song of the Youth, but it hasn't got a groove in it, there's no bassline. I know it was probably made in the 50s, but I've got plenty of wicked percussion records made in the 50s that are awesome to dance to. And they've got basslines. I could remix it: I don't know about making it better; I wouldn't want to make it into a dance version, but I could probably make it a bit more anally technical. But I'm sure he could these days, because tape is really slow. I used to do things like that with tape, but it does take forever, and I'd never do anything like that again with tape. Once you've got your computer sorted out, it pisses all over stuff like that, you can do stuff so fast. It has a different sound, but a bit more anal.

I haven't heard anything new by him; the last thing was a vocal record, Stimmung, and I didn't really like that. Would I take his comments to heart? The ideal thing would be to meet him in a room and have a wicked discussion. For all I know, he could be taking the piss. It's a bit hard to have a discussion with someone via other people.

I don't think I care about what he thinks. It is interesting, but it's disappointing, because you'd imagine he'd say that anyway. It wasn't anything surprising. I don't know anything about the guy, but I expected him to have that sort of attitude. Loops are good to dance to...

He should hang out with me and my mates: that would be a laugh. I'd be quite into having him around.

Scanner on Hymnen

It's interesting that I've not heard this before, and maybe Thomas Köner hasn't and so on, but you can relate it to our work. I don't know whether it's conscious or not. I was two years old when this was written!

Stockhausen says he don't like repetitions: what I like about repetition is it can draw the listener and lull you into a false sense of security, but when it gets too abstract - this is cut-ups - I find it very difficult to digest over a long period of time. He's a lapsed Catholic, and there's the sense that it's meant to be a religious experience passing through these records, like a purging of the system. Whether you like it or not, you're affected in one way or another. I'd like to hear this live.

I prefer the gentler passages. I do find myself irritated by that barrage of sound against sound over a long period of time: an alternative kind of repetition. That's why I like Jim O'Rourke's work, because it works over long periods.

I wonder about him putting himself into the recording; is it a vanity thing, or part of the process? With the scanner, it's like live editing, which is like this as well. When you scan, if you don't like something you flick between frequencies, when you DJ you cut between records, and it is an art form as a form of live editing...

Reminds me of the Holger Czukay LP *Der Osten Ist Rot*, cutting between national anthems, like tuning through a radio: I don't know whether this is actually happening or not. this is very good actually - better than I expected. At the end there's a recording of him breathing. It's quite uncomfortable - like being inside his head.

I take some of what he said about my music to heart. Part of what I'm interested in is transforming material. Lots of the sounds I use are off the scanner or the shortwave radio. Lots of people wouldn't realise that sometimes a bass sound isn't a keyboard bass sound: it's a little blip on the phone. So I do try and transform the material as much as possible. I disagree about repetition: I think, as John Cage said, repetition is a form of change, and it's a concept you either agree or disagree with. I like repetitions; I like Richie Hawtin's work for that very aspect. In a way it is like a religious experience: if his work is about spirituality, then this is a kind of alternative, non-religious spirituality, where you're drawn in by this block of rhythm; it's an incredible feeling, the way it moves you physically, and moves you in a dancefloor as well.

Things like this are designed to be listened to over long periods of time,

and sometimes I think it could do with some editing. Most contemporary sound artists are working within a four to ten minute time scale, basically. And to be honest, for most people that's enough.

Daniel Pemberton on Kontakte

At first I expected someone hitting a piano randomly, but there were happenings in there, with stereo panning and effects. I was very impressed considering the time it was done: the 1960s. He was going on about how everyone's stuff was repetitive, but his stuff is the complete opposite: so unrepeatitive that it never really got anywhere. Not necessarily a bad thing, but it didn't have any development in it: sounded like an Old School FSOL. When he recommends Kontakte for its "very demanding harmonic relationships", it sounds a bit suspect to me: the whole piece seems to be dealing far more with timbre than with harmonic relationship. It's obviously based around sound, and any harmonics on there, to the non-musical ear, sound like a piano hit randomly. It would be very good to put some HipHop breaks under, actually.

What he said about me was quite funny: he accuses me of old hat... I was born in 1977, 25 after [Kontakte], a longer time than I've lived. I'm still learning musical history. If my whole career goes down the pan, at least I've got a future with Mr Whippy! And for him to call eighths, ninth and tenths 'kitschy'! The scales I commonly use aren't too adventurous, but that's because they're the ones that sound nice. The stuff I've done which is unlistenable, I haven't released because no one would enjoy it.

It's good to have other people's views. I ignore them in the sense that I know what I want to do: his criticisms won't make me throw everything away and start working with bizarre new scales and fantastic new instruments. I know what he means about loops though; that's because I haven't got much equipment.

Get a chewn, mate! I think he should develop his music a bit more. Try and repeat some of the ideas, work on them, build them up; you can still change them. He should listen to a track off my forthcoming album, Homemade. Stockhausen should experiment more with standard melodies, try and subvert them; he should stop being so afraid of the normal: by being so afraid of the normal he's being normal himself by being the complete opposite. He should try to blend the two together: that would be new and interesting. To me, anyway.

Interviews by Rob Young. Richie Hawtin was not available for his comments on Zyklus.