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| Stockhausen, Karlheinz (1928-2007) |
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| For much of the fifties and sixties, the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen was an absolutely seminal figure within the European avant-garde. By the mid-fifties, every new work of his seemed to open up new perspectives for radical composing: key notions and genres such as serialism, electronic music, variable forms and graphic notation were all crucially affected by his work. Of all post-war composers, Stockhausen best exemplifies Chateaubriand’s dictum that ‘the original writer is not the one who imitates no one, but he whom no one can imitate’; whereas other major figures had hosts of epigones, Stockhausen’s huge influence largely involved his way of thinking about composition, which was constantly evolving and re-forming, rather than attempted emulations. At the same time, by the late sixties he was also something of a cult figure in the pop/rock world, as witness his appearance on the cover of the Beatles’ ‘Sergeant Pepper’ album. Yet from the mid-seventies, Stockhausen increasingly (though never totally) withdrew from the public eye, working for just over twenty-five years on a massive cycle of seven operas collectively entitled Licht [Light], involving about thirty hours of music – probably the most ambitious (completed) project in the whole of Western art music. |
| For much of the fifties and sixties, the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen was an absolutely seminal figure within the European avant-garde. By the mid-fifties, every new work of his seemed to open up new perspectives for radical composing: key notions and genres such as serialism, electronic music, variable forms and graphic notation were all crucially affected by his work. Of all post-war composers, Stockhausen best exemplifies Chateaubriand’s dictum that ‘the original writer is not the one who imitates no one, but he whom no one can imitate’; whereas other major figures had hosts of epigones, Stockhausen’s huge influence largely involved his way of thinking about composition, which was constantly evolving and re-forming, rather than attempted emulations. At the same time, by the late sixties he was also something of a cult figure in the pop/rock world, as witness his appearance on the cover of the Beatles’ ‘Sergeant Pepper’ album. Yet from the mid-seventies, Stockhausen increasingly (though never totally) withdrew from the public eye, working for just over twenty-five years on a massive cycle of seven operas collectively entitled LICHT [Light], involving about thirty hours of music – probably the most ambitious (completed) project in the whole of Western art music.  It’s hard to conceive that in 1947, Stockhausen was a teenage orphan who had somehow survived military service in a frontline medical corps, and was now working as a farmhand for relatives close to Altenburg, the village not far outside Cologne where he was born nineteen years earlier. In fact, throughout his life, Stockhausen retained a very strong sense of home territory, and despite endless worldwide travels, he spent the last forty years of his life based in Kürten, a small town not far from Altenburg. However, in 1947 he gained admission to the Musikhochschule in Cologne, where he was enrolled in a music education course, but came to study composition with renowned Swiss composer Frank Martin. Towards the end of his studies he encountered the composer and theoretician Herbert Eimert (b. ????), who advised him in 1951 to attend the recently founded Darmstadt New Music Summer Courses, for which Arnold Schönberg had been invited as composition lecturer. Schönberg was actually too ill to attend, but Darmstadt provided two vital stimuli to Stockhausen’s future work. One was hearing a recording of Olivier Messiaen’s Modes de valeurs et d’intensités (which he described as ‘fantastic star music’); the other was meeting former Messiaen student Karel Goeyvaerts. These two factors led Stockhausen to set off in an entirely new direction, in which the serial organisation of pitches, dynamics, timbre and registers had a theological basis as well as a compositional one (religious belief would always be central to Stockhausen’s work), and in early 1952 he moved to Paris to study with Messiaen.  By this time he had already written Kreuzspiel, his first significant work in this new style (sometimes described as ‘point music’, on account of the seemingly isolated nature of individual sounds). When performed at the next year’s Darmstadt courses, it caused a scandal, as did many – even most – of Stockhausen’s early works, and like many of them, he initially withdrew it; it was only with Kontra-Punkte, from 1953, that his ‘official’ catalogue of works (published for the next 20 years by Universal Edition in Vienna) began. By this time he had not only become familiar with the Parisian avant-garde, notably Pierre Boulez and Jean Barraqué), but had also had a chance to work in the musique concrete studios. While he described the brief Konkrete Etüde he realised there as a ‘negative result’, his experiences stood him in good stead when, returning to Cologne in 1953, he was employed at the newly founded Electronic Music Studio. But whereas the Paris studio concentrated on processing pre-recorded sounds (conventionally ‘musical’ or otherwise), the Cologne studios initially focussed on sounds produced with electronic wave-generators. This is reflected in Stockhausen’s two Electronic Studies, but within a couple of years he was accepting the combination and integration of recorded and electronic sounds in Gesang Der Jünglinge, which was the first generally recognized classic of electronic music. Here, Stockhausen establishes a crucial notion: rather than juxtaposing pitch and noise, he mediates between them. Similarly, while Stockhausen moves decisively from during this period from the ‘points’ of the earlier pieces to ‘groups’ made up of points, and thence to ‘statistical’ complexes (dense ‘groups of groups’), it’s never a matter of one displacing the others: the palette of possibilities is constantly being added to.  In fact, from the mid-fifties to the early sixties, almost every work of Stockhausen’s was not only path-breaking but also set new standards; in some respects, they seemed comparable to the almost unbroken string of masterpieces Beethoven produced from the ‘Waldstein’ Sonata (op. 53) to the Violin Concerto (Op. 61). Alongside Gesang Der Jünglinge, there were classic explorations of controlled indeterminacy in the wind quintet Zeitmasze and Klavierstück Xi, while the extraordinary Gruppen (Groups) for 3 orchestras, which called for 3 conductors, often beating simultaneously in different tempi, deeply impressed even the elderly Stravinsky.  A striking aspect of his works around 1960 is the sudden expansion of the time scale. Apart from the 25-minute Gruppen, Stockhausen’s works of the fifties had largely remained within the ‘up to 15 minutes’ mould typical of the so-called ‘post-Webern era’. But both Carre and Kontakte last over half an hour, while the initial presentation of Momente at Donaueschingen in 1965 lasts over and hour. This also leads at times to much longer durations, where time seems to ‘stand still’, and it is here that a meditative aspect in his work also becomes apparent.  Two other important aspects of Stockhausen’s work at this time are embodied in two emblematically titled works: Momente, and Plus-Minus. The first of these – ‘moment form’ rests on the idea that any moment in a piece is systematically related to all others, yet also stands on its own; this is an approach that Stockhausen used intermittently to the end of his life. The second – ‘process form’ – specifies parametric transformations, but leaves free the elements to which they are applied. Whereas Momente has all the gestural hallmarks of a ‘great work’, Plus-Minus is not a piece, but a compositional blueprint: a highly intricate set of ‘2 x 7 Pages for Realisation’ (of which Stockhausen never made a complete version). In fact, Plus-Minus proved impossible to play from the score, and Stockhausen devised a series of much simpler scores (all also involving the ‘live electronics’ that Stockhausen had been exploring since Mixtur in 1964), in which plus and minus signs were applied to dynamics, durations, phrase articulation, and so forth. This gave rise to controversy on two fronts. Firstly, pieces like Prozession and Kurzwellen had continuous textures, and lacked the sharp formal articulation many admirers prized in pieces like Telemusik. Secondly, their performance was based, and perhaps dependent, on a small group founded by Stockhausen, including young composers Fritsch and Gehlhaar, but with Stockhausen controlling things from the mixing desk. Given the very free scores, questions of authorship arose, and after a massive series of performances of the Tokyo Expo in 1970, the group broke up.  In the same year, Stockhausen returned to much more fixed compositional methods, in Mantra for 2 pianos and ring modulation. The basis of this piece was not just a series, but a *melody*, each phrase and note of which was expanded to create the overall formal structure, and from this point onwards, identifiable melodies came to play an increasingly prominent role in his work. This method, which Stockhausen called ‘formula composition’, was to dominate his work for almost the rest of his life. The title Mantra obviously implies a spiritual orientation, and this was to be the case with almost all of Stockhausen’s subsequent works. It becomes more explicit in two major works from the seventies – Inori and Sirius – and culminates in what is probably the most ambitious undertaking in the whole of Western art music: the 7-part operatic cycle Licht (‘Light’), begun in 1977, completed in 2004, and involving about 30 hours of music. Each opera is named after a day of the week. Stockhausen provides not only the libretto, but also, in many cases, very detailed (composed-out) gestures.  Licht is ‘cosmological’ opera, aimed at elevating mankind to a higher level of consciousness (which Stockhausen firmly believed to be possessed already by extra-terrestrial beings), yet it embraces childhood memories as well as apocalyptic visions. There are three principal, and obviously allegorical figures, each of whom is represented in three forms: as singer, as dancer/mime and as instrumentalist: Michael (tenor and trumpet), Eve (soprano and basset-horn), and Lucifer (bass and trombone). Each of them is associated with a musical ‘formula’, and these are combined to create a triple ‘Superformula’ which determines almost every aspect of the work, from bar-to-bar detail to overall formal structures. Three of the operas are primarily associated with single protagonists (Monday = Eve, Thursday = Michael., Saturday = Lucifer), and three more with pairings (Tuesday = Lucifer and Michael [contest], Friday = Eve and Lucifer [temptation], Sunday = Eve + Michael [mystical wedding]), while Wednesday notionally involves all three [collaboration]. Most of the operas have a preceding ‘Greeting’ and are followed by a ‘Farewell’. Stylistically, the Licht cycle is very diverse; on the one hand, electronic music plays a major role (most especially in Friday), but it is also full of identifiable (Superformula-derived) melodies, and harmonically much of Sunday, while not tonal, is surprisingly euphonious. The idea of a listener ‘singing along’ is not entirely far-fetched.  Following the completion of Licht, in 2005 Stockhausen began work on a new cycle, Klang (‘Sound’), subtitled ‘The 24 Hours of the Day’ (moving down the time scale, he even imagined a subsequent cycle on the 60 minutes of the hour…). There were meant to be twenty-four pieces, but unlike Licht there was no grand uniting scheme, though many pieces use a common 24-note pitch series. The works are all for relatively small forces, and range in length from a few minutes to two hours or more (Natürliche Dauern). There is a constant religious (Christian) underlay; in many of the instrumental works, the performers recite brief sacred texts. Perhaps sensing already that his days were numbered, he worked at high speed. But two works composed in 2006 lead to a drastic decision. One is Harmonien, an elegant but not especially remarkable piece for a wind instrument; the other is Cosmic Pulses, an over-the-top composition of extraordinary density for 24 pre-recorded tracks, all with loops of various lengths and speeds (in effect, this was Stockhausen’s last ‘scandal’; some listeners were outraged, but many others were enthralled). Stockhausen decided that the remainder of the cycle would be derived from these two pieces: one group would compromise ensemble pieces extrapolated from Harmonien, while the other would consist of works for soloists and 4 adjacent tracks (e.g. 13-16) from Cosmic Pulses. All but three of these pieces were completed prior to his death. Though Stockhausen typically depicted them as new steps forward, posterity is more likely to regard them as a sort of Indian Summer. Selected List of Works: *Kreuzspiel*, oboe, bass clarinet, piano, 3 percussionists (1951)  *Formel*, chamber orchestra (1951)  *Kontra-Punkte*, ‘for 10 instruments’ (1953)  *Klavierstücke* [*Piano Pieces*] *I-IV* (1952)  *Electronic Studies I-II*, electronic music (1953-54)  *Klavierstücke V-X*, piano (1954/61)  *Zeitmasze*, wind quintet (1955)  *Gruppen*, 3 orchestras (1955-57)  *Klavierstück XI*, piano (1956)  *Gesang Der Jünglinge*, electronic music (1956)  *Zyklus*, solo percussionist (1959)  *Refrain*, vibraphone, celesta and piano (1959)  *Carré*, 4 choirs and orchestras (1960)  *Kontakte*, piano, percussion and electronic music (1960)  *Punkte*, orchestra (1952/62, rev 1966)  *Momente*, soprano, 4 choral groups, 13 instrumentalists (1962-69)  *Plus Minus*, ‘2x7 Pages for Realisation’, any ensemble (1963)  *Mikrophonie I*, amplified tam-tam and 6 players, with live electronics (1964)  *Mixtur*, orchestra with live electronics (1964)  *Mikrophonie II*, chorus, Hammond organ, live electronics(1965)  *Telemusik*. electronic music (1966)  *Hymnen*, electronic music with [4] soloists’ (1967)  *Prozession*, 4 players, any instrumentation (1967)  *Stimmung*, six vocalists (1968)  *Kurzwellen*, 5 players, 4 with SW radio sets, any instrumentation (1968)  *Aus Den Sieben Tagen*, text compositions, any ensemble (1968)  *Spiral*, for a soloist‘, any instrumentation, with SW radio (1968)  *Mantra*, two pianos with ring-modulation (1970)  *Trans*, orchestra with tape (1971)  *Inori*, mime (‚prayer‘) and orchestra (1973)  *Sirius*, 4 soloists and electronic music (1975)  *Licht*, opera cycle (1977-2004): ‘The Seven Days of the Week’  *Klang* (2005-07): ‘The 24 Hours of the Day’ |
| Further reading:  [Enter citations for further reading here] |