

# contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

## Citation

Toop, Richard. 1979. 'On Writing About Stockhausen'. *Contact*, 20. pp. 25-27. ISSN 0308-5066.

□ RICHARD TOOP

## Stockhausen - 2: On writing about Stockhausen

IF THE PURPOSE of a review were merely to assist a book in making its first steps in the world, or alternatively to kill it at birth, there would be little point in my writing about Robin Maconie's *The Works of Karlheinz Stockhausen* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976): it has been at large for some two years now and has successfully established itself as the biggest and best available study of Stockhausen's work. There's a great deal it leaves unsaid, of course, especially in terms of technical procedure and, more surprisingly, artistic motivation: using a favourite formula of Stockhausen's, one might say that there's plenty of What, but not so much How or Why. (The Why in the book is mainly on Maconie's terms, which are often at a tangent to Stockhausen's.) Still, it's probably too soon for a book of Newmanesque proportions: at this stage one can only hope that the sheer dimensions of Maconie's book won't prove an obstacle to the further production of more modest volumes which might usefully fill in some of Maconie's gaps.

When the book first came out, I suspected that some of Maconie's more seductively phrased philosophical excursions, though intriguing enough to those who already know the basics of Stockhausen's outlook, might lay some perilous traps in the path of the innocent reader. A couple of years of ill-advised student quotations from Maconie's book have convinced me that my fears were justified: it's one thing for Maconie to assert that 'Like *Zyklus, Refrain* is a parable of time: of the experience of time as an expression of mortality, and a reconciliation with the transitory nature of human existence'; but when a student makes the same assertion (albeit as an acknowledged quotation) to an understandably bemused seminar group, and then wilts in the face of a simple request to explain what the phrase means, it's clear that the book has its dangers. The more so because when one looks in Maconie's text for a simple exposition of what *Refrain* is 'about', as opposed to elegant metaphysical conceits, one doesn't find it: fact and fancy are inextricably linked. The moral is, of course, that when dealing with music one should look at scores and listen to performances first and read books afterwards. But not every reader has ready access to Stockhausen scores, and any book that is intended as an introduction to unfamiliar works should take care to delineate the wood before conceptualising about the foliage of the trees.

Don't imagine from this that I am opposed to 'interpretation': that is, to the unfolding of an artist's inner life or to the explanation of an artist's work in terms of his driving compulsions or his socio-political environment. Once an artist's work has been authentically documented, it is even admissible for other writers to use him as a touchstone for self-discovery. In

this context, Boulez quotes Michel Butor: "Some people," he [Butor] writes, "consider that, while seeking to write about Baudelaire, I have succeeded only in writing about myself. No doubt it would be more valid to say that it's Baudelaire who is talking about me. *He is talking about you.*"<sup>1</sup> I have no objection to Maconie using Stockhausen to talk about himself (for at times that's what it comes to . . .); it's just that Stockhausen is also an interesting topic for conversation, and that Maconie, writing at a time when Stockhausen's own motives have been the subject of relatively little sympathetic discussion, is too often guilty of reducing him to a mere pretext. Maybe this is because Maconie's own aesthetic frames of reference are so patently Gallic (hence all the references to Messiaen, Pierre Schaeffer and, by extension, 'le Jazz'); readers will need little persuasion that Stockhausen's 'world view', on the other hand, is more Teutonically inclined.

What is it that makes Stockhausen tick? In a phrase, fanatical dedication to the belief of the moment. For a long time this belief was Catholicism, and in a way, despite Stockhausen's later theological voyages to the India of Sri Aurobindo and the Sufi Hazrat Inayat Khan, and subsequently *per ardua ad astra* (i.e. to a transgalactic theology, with the Urantia Book as a transient Faustian heresy), Stockhausen's religious *modus operandi* — especially his insistence on the impotence of reason against belief — remains essentially Catholic. In an earlier review for this magazine,<sup>1</sup> I pointed out that for Stockhausen in the early 50s total serialisation was an attempt to reproduce an image of Divine Perfection in acoustic terms: 'the more complete and consistent the organisation, the nearer it was supposed to come to the divine model'. Stockhausen's letters of this period are full of anguished theological debate, and the consequences drawn are sometimes extreme: in the same letter that I quoted in that earlier review, Stockhausen, with only two months of marriage (to a wife he genuinely adored) behind him, wrote: 'Yesterday, at Mass, I became calm and humble once again. Recently I have thought a lot about Matthew Chap. 19, verses 10, 11 and 12, and Chap. 19, verses 21 and 29 — I've come to it too late. May God show me the true way — I shall do nothing but make myself ready'. The verses referred to (quoted in part) are as follows:

10. His Disciples said unto him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry.

<sup>1</sup>Of Jonathan Harvey's *The Music of Stockhausen*, see *Contact 12* (Autumn 1975), pp. 45-46.



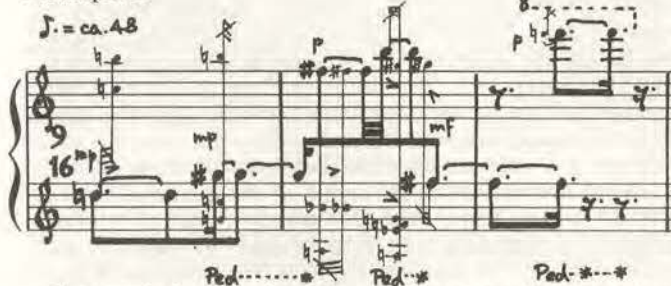
12. ... and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.

29. And every one that hath forsaken house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my Name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.<sup>2</sup>

The young Stockhausen's persistence in the face of implacable opposition is, in itself, one of the minor miracles of music history, all the more so in view of Stockhausen's relentless self-criticism. At this period the concept of each new work as an indivisible whole was sacrosanct to him: to criticise details of a composition was to question its entire *raison d'être*, and rather than touch up a few defective details of a new work, he typically preferred to rewrite the whole composition. *Kontra-Punkte* was subjected to a complete rewrite; the original structures of *Zeitmasze* and *Gruppen* were torn apart by drastic insertions; *Klavierstück VI*, the most complex of all the Piano Pieces, was radically rewritten several times over. Like all its predecessors, Maconie's book reveals no trace of this compositional turmoil; like them, it remains overawed by the myth of Stockhausen the Systematist. Stockhausen, the least Marxist of the contemporary avantgarde, is (or was) the exemplification of Marx's single but celebrated utterance on the subject of Art Music: 'Composition is damned hard work.'

By way of example, let's return to *Klavierstück VI*. In its original form, it was a discreet miniature lasting scarcely more than a minute. The opening is shown in Example 1.<sup>3</sup>

Example 1



It wasn't long before Stockhausen decided that the whole cycle of *Klavierstücke V-X* (of which he had only completed nos. V-VIII) needed expansion and that *Klavierstück VI*, as the 'baby' of the cycle, was the prime candidate. Using a variety of serial criteria which probably derive from preliminary work on the wind quintet *Zeitmasze*, he began a drastically revised and expanded version of *Klavierstück VI*, the starting point for which was the same set of serial tables that had engendered the original miniature version. The new version was finished on about December 3, 1954. A couple of days later he wrote to Pousseur: 'Excuse my not having answered; I haven't looked to right or left,<sup>4</sup> I've just worked on my piano piece, which has grown to 14 pages and has been finished for 2 days. Phew! that took 3

<sup>2</sup>Stockhausen's subsequent reputation, as being at least an 'homme moyen sensuel', should intensify the substance of these thoughts rather than detract from them. Still, if these notions recall Wagner's assertion that 'chastity works miracles', cynics might be forgiven for remembering Nietzsche's response: 'Wagnerus dixit princeps in castitate auctoritas'.

<sup>3</sup>In his Appendix of uncompleted and/or unpublished works, Maconie says that what I have provisionally described as Piano Pieces 5½ and 6½ relate to *Klavierstücke V* and *VI*; they actually relate to *VI* and *VII*.

<sup>4</sup>Aloys Kontarsky, who first got to know Stockhausen around this period, says that it was precisely Stockhausen's remorseless singleness of vision that was so striking and, ultimately, persuasive.

months ... I believe it's quite acceptable. I had to hurry terribly, because Tudor still wants to play it in New York with the others on 16.12.<sup>5</sup> He told me that he could still study the piece if he had the manuscript by the 8th. That seems impossible to me. Perhaps it's all right for Cage's music, where it doesn't matter so much because there's much more scope left for ambiguities. Well, we'll see'.

Example 2



Example 2 gives the new opening of *Klavierstück VI*. Contentment with this new version didn't last long; within a few months Stockhausen had decided that the harmony was not sufficiently 'sauber' ('clean') and rewrote the whole piece once again. In the process the register position of the opening was almost totally inverted (see Example 3).

Example 3



This version gained sufficient currency in Stockhausen's eyes to make its way onto a Vega 'Domaine Musical' recording played by David Tudor, and the opening at least corresponds fairly closely to the printed score. But this version, too, was substantially recomposed by Stockhausen in 1960, shortly before *Klavierstücke V-X* were finally submitted for publication to Universal Edition, and the second half, submitted for publication to Universal Edition, and the second half, in particular, was decked out with a plethora of additional arpeggio figures that occasionally recall Stravinsky and even Skryabin.

Now one can write a perfectly good book on Beethoven without so much as acknowledging the existence of sketch-books, and simply treating each published work as a fait accompli. The same is true of Stockhausen, and yet it seems to me that in both cases there's at least one dimension missing if one doesn't make a distinction between what a work started out as and what it became. This is particularly true of Stockhausen, whose initial concept of a work is always very clearly defined, yet who frequently manages to stray a sizeable distance from his original concept during the course of composition. The *Klavierstücke V-X*, *Gruppen*, *Zeitmasze* and many other works from the 50s underwent drastic transformations, and these revisions aren't 'exceptions' within Stockhausen's compositional make-up: they are an integral part of it. Maconie's book, as he says in his own preface, is 'a speculative view of the whole of

<sup>5</sup>The others being *Klavierstücke V*, *VII* and *VIII*, the first two pieces being at this stage very different from the published versions.



Stockhausen's creative development to the present time'; it's a pity, perhaps, that his speculations don't extend to the creative process itself.

And it's a pity, too, that the necessity to deal with over 60 works individually in about 300 pages, many of which are already taken up with musical examples (not that I have any complaints about that: it's one of the book's exemplary features), precludes much analytical examination of the works, or even a clear description of their formal outlines such as one would expect to find in any book on the classical, sonata-form orientated repertoire. The Stockhausen literature as a whole leaves much to be desired in this respect; there are plenty of articles and chapters dealing with technical details but few that describe an audible *form*. Yet whatever their technical complexities, most of Stockhausen's works do have such a form, and this audible form is not necessarily at odds with the conception of detail.

Let's take an example: *Kreuzspiel*. As Maconie rightly observes, the piece falls into three main sections. In the first the pitches start out in extremely high or low registers, gradually fill out a seven-octave range evenly and then retreat back to the extremes, with the six pitches that started out at the top finishing off at the bottom and vice versa. The second section reverses the process: the pitches start in the central octaves, expand to the full range of the piano and then come back to the centre. The third section, somewhat less audibly, combines the two processes. Maconie never really gets round to describing these basic formal processes. Moreover, he doesn't mention the reason for using a couple of wind instruments alongside the piano, which is that the wind instruments have a narrower range than the piano (more concentrated on the central octaves) and that their increased use in the composition is always a sign that the middle octaves are being incorporated into the register form. By the nature of things, Part II, which starts off in the middle register, is dominated by the wind instruments. Maconie doesn't explain this; instead he writes: 'In this section, Stockhausen's gift of evoking an atmosphere of quite touching melancholy . . . is clearly apparent.' Naturally, chromatic melodies written within a range of one or two octaves are likely to be more 'melancholy' than those distributed boldly over seven octaves. But the function of these melodies is a severely formal one; if they happen to be 'touchingly melancholy' that's a more or less inadvertent by-product of the serial organisation (whereas in later works of Stockhausen, expressive effects are more consciously sought — and achieved).

Similarly, if Stockhausen uses number tables, it's for a purpose, and if one is going to mention these tables at all one should at least show why they are there. Talking about *Klavierstück I*, Maconie produces the table given in Example 4 and comments: 'The piece is constructed first of all on a series of time proportions, expressed in crotchet values, 1, 2, 3, . . . 6. . . . Each note group is distinguished by its number of attacks, number of notes, their range . . .' etc.

#### Example 4

5 2 3 1 4 6 || 3 6 5 4 2 1 || 2 6 4 1 3 5 || 4 1 6 2 3 5  
 6 5 1 4 3 2 || 3 5 (1) 1 4 2 4 +

On the positive side, Maconie has (for the first time, as far as I'm aware) drawn attention to the 6x6 construction of the piece. On the negative side, though, I can't help remarking that:

(1) the serial square (which isn't presented as a square, though (it should be) is wrong; the correct square is shown in Example 5(a). The origin of which is clear enough; reading down each column, one always gets the sequence 1 5 3 2 4 6, i.e. Example 5(b).

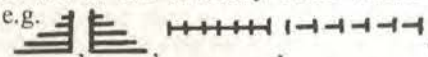
#### Example 5(a)

5	2	3	1	4	6
3	4	2	5	6	1
2	6	4	3	1	5
4	1	6	2	5	3
6	5	1	4	3	2
1	3	5	6	2	4

#### (b)

2  
 1  
 6  
 5  
 4  
 3  
 2  
 1  
 6  
 5 etc.

(2) What the duration groups *do* (apart from creating awkward succession of time signatures) is not explained. In fact, the 'phrases' created by the series follow the same kind of *modal* structure that Stockhausen had used in the *Konkrete Etude* and was to use in many other works written in 1953-54, e.g.



The first bar, for example, belongs to the first type (notes enter successively, end together); the second bar, with its five silence plus sound divisions, belongs to the fourth category (Example 6).

#### Example 6

l.h. | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 |

ratio of  
 silence to  
 sound (in ♪): 5:0 1:4 0:5 3:2 2:3  
                   ↑          ↑  
                   all          all  
                   silence    sound

The almost terrifying technical complexity of some of Stockhausen's pieces from the 50s has yet to be revealed in print. Maconie describes *Klavierstück VIII* (1954) as being 'principally organized around a scale of dynamics'. In fact, the organisation of *Klavierstück VIII* rests on at least a dozen simultaneously operative serial levels: two for pitches (grace notes and 'main notes'), and the others for such things as number of superordinate groups (groups of groups) per section, number of groups per superordinate group, number of attacks per grace-note group, number of notes in each grace-note attack, dynamic level of the grace note groups, and an even larger number of specifications for the main notes.

As is inevitable in a pioneering book of this size, there are a number of factual errors. I don't have space to correct them here, and I should prefer to point out, in Maconie's defence, that very many of these errors are the result of Stockhausen's distinctly hazy recollections of the early years, rather than negligence on Maconie's part. (The discrepancy between Stockhausen's published reminiscences of the 1951-55 period and evidence provided by surviving letters from these years would, in itself, furnish a pretty hefty article.)

At a distance of two years I find myself concentrating on the flaws and omissions in Maconie's *Stockhausen* rather than its many sterling virtues. In fact it is a very good book, maybe an indispensable one. But as far as the Stockhausen literature is concerned there is still a lot to be done. Allons-y!