

contact

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

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

Citation

Maconie, Robin. 1980. 'Letter to the Editors'. *Contact*, 21. pp. 48. ISSN 0308-5066.

LETTER TO THE EDITORS

Dear Sirs,

My exceeding delight at *Contact's* reappearance, and joy at yet again providing a pretext for Richard Toop to air his invaluable knowledge of Stockhauseniana, considerably outweigh any sense of grievance his asperities ('On writing about Stockhausen', *Contact* 20, pp. 25-27) may have intended to arouse. If you want to fish in winter you have to be ready to endure the cold, but to do any fishing at all, for minnows or snags, someone has to break the ice.

My book was written in order that a significant composer might be recognised and discussed without prejudice during his lifetime, in a way Bartók, Webern, Schoenberg and Varèse were denied during theirs. That the strategy has appeared to succeed is witnessed by the bleeding chunks of text which appear unacknowledged in record reviews and elsewhere; that Stockhausen is now good copy for the music press is evidenced at least in part by the subsequent publishing career of Mr Toop himself. I bow to his more intimate acquaintance with the Stockhausen archives, acknowledge his helpful assistance in my own clumsy endeavours, rejoice at each successive appearance of a new chapter from his own definitive study (whether in *Contact*, *Perspectives*, *Musical Quarterly* or *The Music Review*) and deplore the circumstances which have conspired to prevent publication of these, and his translations of Boulez and Stockhausen, earlier and in book form. Had this material been published in 1972 my book might never have been written. But it was not available then, nor is it all now. My justification for devoting four years to the task for which I am now chivvied is summed up by Schoenberg's remark: 'Someone had to do the job, and no-one else was willing, so it fell to me.' And the need to break the ice demanded a blunt instrument (if one can still say as much without suggesting abject betrayal) — not a surgeon's scalpel.

But the two years or so during which my book has, in Mr Toop's own words, 'established itself as the biggest and best available study of Stockhausen's work' have also afforded its author ample opportunity to assess Mr Toop's own piecemeal contribution to the Stockhausen literature in its wake. For for all his detailed knowledge of the composer's affairs in the early 1950s, it has become clear that Mr Toop's interpretation of the composer's personality has its peculiar side.

In an otherwise generous review of my book in the *TLS* (December 3, 1976), he describes it incorrectly as a biography, then goes on to attack at some length my clearly stated decision not to write a biography. There were a number of reasons. In the first place, I could not have written a biography: I did not have access to the necessary information, nor do I have the skill or inclination in that direction. Furthermore, during the time the book was being written I was living in conditions not unadjacent to poverty; it was only through the Arts Council providing a grant that I was able to make the one fact-finding expedition to Cologne and Kürten that I could afford.

In the second place, there is no room in an already bulky and over-priced book for empty speculation of *that* kind. More to the point, I don't believe that the physical circumstances of a composer's career explain his music in the manner Richard Toop appears to imagine. It does not matter to me that Beethoven was careless of personal hygiene, or Stravinsky an hypochondriac. Their music inhabits a separate world, a fact which I agree may be difficult for a non-composer to grasp, but a fact nonetheless. Let me add that my book is a composer's tribute to another composer, not a scholar's — nor, Mr Toop notwithstanding, that of a rabid Gallic or starry-eyed Messiaen acolyte (I did after all *study* with Stockhausen after studying with Messiaen, a full eight years before the book was conceived).

Not that I object to the idea of biography, only wishing that Mr Toop would get on with it instead of blaming me for not doing what he is so evidently more capable of achieving. Instead, Mr Toop's harping on this particular theme has become distinctly monotone. 'What is it that makes Stockhausen tick?' he asks rhetorically. 'In a phrase, fanatical dedication to the belief of the moment.' The key to this composer is, would you believe, religious fanaticism: Catholicism in youth, Aurobindo in middle age.

So what? I fail myself to see any objection to strong belief in an artist, however it might be manifested. Faith in oneself

is necessary, especially for a specialist in new forms of thought, and the strongest form of belief in oneself is dedication to a suprapersonal goal. To call it 'fanaticism' is misleading as well as shamefully pejorative. A fanatic is someone who sacrifices other people to achieve his own ambition, not himself to an ideal. I have recently been taken with the discovery that the detailed mathematics of form and pitch organisation in Stockhausen's early scores, which Mr Toop attributes to the composer's 'fanatical quest for divine perfection', bear comparison with the intricate proportional relationships of English ecclesiastical music from Dunstable to Frye and Taverner, arising from precisely similar motives. Is the 'quest' and its expression in tonal proportion to be admired in the one and abhorred in the other? But of course it is now fashionable to regard Schoenberg as obsessively concerned with his Jewishness, and Webern as a hopeless neurotic.

Mr Toop also plays a familiar tune in his remarks on what I do or do not say about *Refrain*, saying much the same thing in his *TLS* review of 1976. If it indeed represents a 'perilous trap' or 'dangerous metaphysics' to describe *Refrain* as a parable of mortality, then I am entirely unrepentant. Traps for the unwary are no bad thing: even he must admit that they enable the unwary to be sorted out from the wary. A student who is unable to understand such a simple description, having heard the music, is going to have difficulty with a lot more than just Stockhausen. (But students also reflect their teachers, too: how, I wonder, if Mr Toop doesn't understand my meaning, does he expect his students to follow it?) And why 'dangerous'?

In addition, I must protest at the implication that I say no more about *Refrain*. On the contrary, I describe the work as pointillist, jazz-orientated, an exercise in timbre-composition related to *Electronic Study I*, influenced by his study of phonetics, comparable in certain ways with Boulez' *Une dentelle s'abolit*, and much more. If Mr Toop has more of importance to add, let him do so: why doesn't he?

He also complains that I don't get round to describing basic formal procedures in *Kreuzspiel*. Since I relied on Mr Toop for what structural information *is* there, dare I say he has only himself to blame? But in reality my book is not intended for his sort of reader (who can find the aforementioned information in Jonathan Harvey in any case). What I do point out (on page 26) is the work's 'cross-play' from piano (non-sustaining) to winds (sustaining) and from pitched to non-pitched instruments as well as from high to low. Mr Toop ignores all this, however, choosing to remember only a passing reference to the woodwinds' 'air of melancholy', an observation which may not strike him as terribly useful (though he has apparently found it hard to forget) but which might suggest to a less specialist amateur a link between this aspect of the piece and the voices in *Gesang der Jünglinge*.

The mildness of Mr Toop's criticisms doesn't render their occasional querulous perversity any more attractive. Until he can come up with a more coherent thesis than hitherto — and may this be soon — I am content to remain,

Yours unrepentantly,
Robin Maconie