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MUSICAL EVENTS

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Stockhausen's "Gruppen," at Tempelhof Airport, in Berlin.

BY ALEX ROSS



Stockhausen's music communicates an almost childlike joy in the possibilities of sound.

For a few years in the late nineteen-sixties and early seventies, Karlheinz Stockhausen, the German avant-garde composer, nearly achieved the status of a pop icon. Each new piece of his attracted crowds of critics, struggling to convey the latest cosmic splatter of pointillistically variegated sounds. A lavish recording usually followed on the Deutsche Grammophon label. His lectures, mesmerizing in their mixture of scientific detail and visionary speculation, drew composers, professors, misfits, and rock stars. In 1967, the Beatles included his face on the cover of "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," having already echoed his space-age bleeps in "Tomorrow Never Knows." Hippies began showing up at Stockhausen's concerts, which themselves assumed a psychedelic aura, the composer meditating onstage before the music began. In 1971, he visited the New York Philharmonic to present his electronic-instrumental work "Hymnen," a frenzied collage of national anthems. The *Times*, calling Stockhausen a "Pied Piper of the Young," reported, "Instead of the elderly clientele who dote on their Mozart, Beethoven, and Tchaikovsky, there was long hair, there were miniskirts and hot pants, there were bearded boys in sweaters and denims, there was even a suspicious odor that sort of resembled tobacco."

Then came what seemed an irreversible decline. Every year, people talked about Stockhausen a little less. The New Age drift of his life style and philosophy—he lived with two female companions and claimed to have emanated from the star Sirius—eroded his intellectual reputation, while the minimalists replaced him as beacons for youth. From 1977 until the first years of the present decade, Stockhausen sank his energies into a series of seven operas named after days of the week, the entire cycle entitled "Licht." La Scala staged the first three installments in the eighties, but interest dwindled, and the final parts, "Wednesday" and "Sunday," have yet to be played in full. The low point arrived on September 16, 2001, when, at a press conference in Hamburg, Stockhausen fell to pondering the destruction of the World Trade Center, and, invoking the mythology of his opera cycle, described it as a Luciferian masterpiece. The general feeling was that he had gone off the deep end, and that his music no longer mattered. The last time I saw him in performance, in Berlin in 2002, he seemed a diminished figure, prosaically outfitted in white slacks and an old orange sweater. Yet there was something moving in his determination to keep on working. And there were always large, diverse crowds.

Stockhausen died in December of last year, at the age of seventy-nine. If anyone expected his music to die with him, the opposite has happened: suddenly, he seems to be receiving more performances than ever. In Europe, the Holland Festival, the Proms, and the Warsaw Autumn have all honored Stockhausen in what would have been his eightieth year, and in November retrospectives will take place at London's Southbank Centre and Paris's Festival d'Automne. In this country, by contrast, activity has been minimal; one of very few events in recent months was an all-Stockhausen concert at the ART-Saha! festival in Omaha, Nebraska, where the composer's final electronic work—an abstract, engulfing blur called "Cosmic Pulses"—had its American première. (Non-Nebraskans were able to watch the concert on the Internet.) Perhaps the lack of attention has to do with lingering unease over that World Trade Center comment, although, now that 9/11 has been exploited and trivialized in every conceivable way, the cryptic musings of an elderly German composer hardly seem worthy of notice. Within a few years, I suspect, ar-

ARNOLD NEWMAN/GETTY IMAGES

omatic Stockhausen fans will once again be filling American halls. In some ways, the man's eccentricities impeded the advance of his music, especially in later years. Now the music is all that remains—a chaos of invention that communicates an inexhaustible, almost childlike joy in the possibilities of sound.

Perhaps the handsomest tribute so far in Stockhausen's birth/death year has come from the Berlin Philharmonic, which, at the close of the Berlin Festival, presented "Gruppen," a controlled pandemonium for three orchestral groups and three conductors. The concert took place in Hangar 2 at Tempelhof Airport, the historic site of Hitlerite fantasies and of the Berlin airlift. Tempelhof is scheduled to close at the end of October, and parts of it are being converted to other uses. Hangar 2, a forty-five-thousand-square-foot space that resembles the Park Avenue Armory, is big enough to accommodate Stockhausen's conception; the three orchestras were arrayed in a horseshoe around the audience. With Simon Rattle, the Philharmonic's music director, sharing conducting duties with Daniel Harding and Michael Boder, the orchestra played "Gruppen" twice through on two consecutive nights. Listeners were instructed to change seats between performances so that they could obtain a different acoustic perspective. Beforehand, brass, wind, and percussion players assembled to unleash Messiaen's "Et Exspecto Resurrectionem Mortuorum," another room-shaking investigation of sonic properties. Altogether, these events were among the most gripping orchestral concerts I've attended in recent seasons.

The historically charged setting stirred memories of the weird horror of Stockhausen's youth. A child of a line of farmers, he was orphaned by Nazism and the Second World War: his father, a troubled Nazi, died on the Eastern Front, and his mother, mentally ill, was apparently killed in the Nazi euthanasia program. As a teen-ager, he served as a stretcher-bearer behind the collapsing front, attending to soldiers whose faces had melted away. A fan of American pop, he sometimes serenaded dying soldiers with the likes of "Tea for Two" and "Honeysuckle Rose." During the American occupation, he studied at the Summer Courses for New Music in Darmstadt, which was supported, in part, by "reorientation" dollars. In short, Stockhausen's mind was shaped and scarred by the historical furies that now haunt the desolate corridors of Tempelhof. If, in later years, this composer appeared to have booked himself on one long flight from reality, who can blame him?

Stockhausen worked on "Gruppen" from 1955 to 1957, at the height of his involvement with a technique known as total serialism, which preoccupied many young Europeans in the fifties. Schoenberg had developed a system for extracting musical material from rows of twelve notes; the total serialists went further, ringing changes on the various other elements that characterize a note (duration, volume, and so on), so that music entered into a state of unending, frantic flux. At times, this method led to a kind of nerve-racking monotony. But Stockhausen seldom let himself become a prisoner of the system, even as he devised ever more elaborate schemes of ordering. In "Gruppen," he scrupulously avoids writing discernible themes—each instrument seems to be scurrying along its own twisting path—and yet the disparate sounds add up to textures of strongly defined character: insectoid swarms of string pizzicato, birdlike twitterings of upper-register winds, armor-plated blasts of brass.

In some passages, Stockhausen minimized the system and let his fantasy run wild. The latter part of the piece brings a brief, spectacular sequence in which brass sextets in each orchestra throw blazing chords to one another around the space, like alpenhorns resounding across valleys. In fact, Stockhausen conceived the score while staying in a village in the Swiss Alps, and modelled some of his organizational diagrams on mountain shapes. Romantic, too, is the sound of a solo violin singing out against a molten mass. (This music has more in common with Richard Strauss's "Alpine Symphony" than the ultra-modern young composer might have cared to admit.) At the same time, "Gruppen" mimics high-tech noises: showers of electronic pulses, fluctuations of bandwidth. And there's a jazz energy to the wah-wah-ing brass, the squealing clarinets, the pounding tom-toms and wood drums in the percussion. Soon after the Alpine brass sequence comes a gloriously mad freakout for the three orchestras together. It's a bit like hearing the big bands of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Benny Goodman play ad libitum at the end of a very long night on the town.

The almighty Berlin Philharmonic executed Stockhausen's complexities with fierce attention to detail and also with a kind of improvisatory verve. By the fourth performance, the musicians were visibly enjoying themselves. A surprising human warmth emerged from the more subdued, reflective passages of the work: the meanderings of a solitary guitar, the shivering masses of tremolo strings. An almost Mahlerian atmosphere of wistfulness descended in the last few minutes, as the instruments grasped onto the sweeter intervals in Stockhausen's master twelve-tone row. In light of this commanding performance, it's strange to hear reliable sources reporting that Rattle remains a controversial, even embattled figure in Berlin, not least with his own orchestra. Maybe a certain amount of interpersonal tension actually enlivens the music-making. In any case, if the usual Berlin pattern holds, whenever Rattle leaves his post the pundits will reëvaluate his regime as a golden age, and this concert will be cherished as one of his finest moments.

Rattle's most inspired stroke was to pair Stockhausen with Messiaen, whose centenary is being celebrated around the world this year. At first sight, the two composers seem poles apart: the German chasing new timbres, new technologies, alternative spiritual paths, the Frenchman steeped in tonal fundamentals and Catholic dogma. Yet, odd as it may seem, Stockhausen was a practicing Catholic at the time he wrote "Gruppen"; only in the sixties did he renounce organized religion. In the final bar of the score appear the words "DEO GRATIAS." In the neighborhood of "Et Exspecto"—which Rattle and his players delivered with gasp-inducing intensity, the tones of brass and gongs roaring through the hangar at almost unbearable volume—"Gruppen" revealed itself not only as a visceral adventure and a technical tour de force but also as an obliquely spiritual experience. Right at the end, the principal horn lets loose a soft, bright little interval, a rising major third. I had the impression that we had just heard the Big Bang run in reverse, and that this floating interval was the divine spark from which it all began. ♦