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Stockhausen: A Theological Interpretation by Thomas Ulrich (review)

Paul V. Miller

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Salmenhaara's dissertation became the first published analysis of Ligeti's work: *Das musikalische Material und seine Behandlung in den Werken 'Apparitions,' 'Atmosphères,' und 'Requiem' von György Ligeti* (Regensburg, 1969).

The redoubtable Richard Steinitz follows his intriguing remarks on the troubled genesis of the Piano Concerto in his *Music of the Imagination* (London, 2003) with a study of its history, achieved primarily via a painstaking survey of materials in the Sacher Foundation. The Piano Concerto was commissioned in the early 1970s by the American conductor Mario di Bonaventura, but not completed until 1988. Steinitz found over fifty successive beginnings spread over six years, plus three preliminary plans projecting four-, five-, and seven-movement versions. As work on the concerto overlapped with other works, Steinitz includes detailed sketches on the Horn Trio as well, and traces the history of sketches that have escaped the capacious embrace of the Sacher Foundation. Steinitz's consideration of the sketches is informed by his conversations with Ligeti and by his own translucent prose. The reader will be impressed by the Herculean task involved in teasing out a chronology among varied and often undated sketches, as well as by the taut narrative Steinitz constructs, which leads to Ligeti's 'eureka moment': a first movement design in which piano and orchestra are distinguished by complementary harmonic casts, metres, and accent patterns.

My final category of student reminiscences steps away from the work and career to consider the man, as seen through the eyes of two students from Ligeti's group classes in composition at the Hamburg Musikhochschule: Wolfgang-Andreas Schultz and Manfred Stahnke. Both essays betray their authors' unease with certain aspects of their subject; remarkably intimate revelations appear alongside distanced, at times unsympathetic accounts of Ligeti as teacher and mentor. The heated discussions on aesthetics and compositional ethics that marked Ligeti's classes, and which often set students against one another, remain vivid for Schultz and Stahnke. In both articles—but particularly in Stahnke's lengthy account—we see the class evolve from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s, through assaults from the compositional 'left' and new developments in style and technique. Ligeti appears, in Schultz's words, as something of a *musicien maudit* (p. 219), an artist whose high standards often seemed to negate his own past work as well as that of his contemporaries.

The inclusion of such reminiscences alongside probing source studies and historical and analytical commentary makes *Of Foreign Lands and Strange Sounds* a feast for not only Ligeti fans but also chroniclers of late twentieth-century musical life. My one caveat with the physical book: the spine of my copy completely deteriorated before I was halfway through.

AMY BAUER

University of California, Irvine

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Stockhausen: A Theological Interpretation. By Thomas Ulrich, trans. Jayne Obst. pp. xii + 138. (Stockhausen-Stiftung für Musik, Kürten, 2012, €25/\$39. ISBN 978-3-9815317-0-1.)

In the last decade, Thomas Ulrich has made a significant contribution towards demystifying the rich theological associations in Karlheinz Stockhausen's works. Recently, the Stockhausen Verlag translated and published the first half of his book, which deals with Stockhausen (*Neue Musik aus religiösem Geist: Theologisches Denken im Werk von Karlheinz Stockhausen und John Cage* (Saarbrücken, 2006)). Not simply a theologian with academic facility, Ulrich has also distinguished himself by serving as the dramaturge for several recent staged productions of Stockhausen's works, including the memorable 2011 premiere of *Sonntag aus Licht* in Cologne. Ulrich's book provides a valuable but somewhat limited perspective on theological thinking in Stockhausen.

It has long been known that Stockhausen's creations are inundated with theological meaning. The composer himself fancifully called his works a 'fast airship to the divine'. While many have emphasized the variety of religious influences on his works, and Stockhausen often alluded to a diverse array of religious inspiration (perhaps most memorably in the calling of divine names in *Stimmung* but also at numerous other moments, particularly in the *Licht* cycle), Ulrich treats the compositional project primarily as an expression of Christian epistemology. His main thesis is that 'Stockhausen's theological aporia fuelled his artistic development until he found a stable basis for his work in formula composition' (p. viii). Ulrich's methodology seems cautious but prudent: begin by examining the works themselves, not the 'abyss of motives to which Stockhausen occasionally refers' (p. ix). He

arranges Stockhausen's oeuvre by compositional technique, beginning with the early serial music up to about 1954, then moving to Group and Moment form, continuing with Process and Intuitive music, and concluding with Formula and Superformula composition. Notwithstanding these four categories, Ulrich's underlying goal is to demonstrate unity in the composer's life work.

Ulrich identifies a compelling link between Stockhausen's early serial music and the Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus and Proclus. These third- and fifth-century writers, steeped in the Hellenistic intellectual tradition, influenced early Christian metaphysics. They conceived of the 'One' as separated from the cosmos, yet simultaneously permeating it. By connecting early European serialism to these ancient thinkers, Ulrich opens up an appealing way of understanding the young Stockhausen's Herculean efforts in serial determinism. In this reading, rather than manifesting a peculiar control mania, Stockhausen struggled to reflect nothing less than the divine order of the universe in a single musical composition. For Stockhausen, this meant that any dialectic opposition of material had to be eliminated (p. 29). Another way to understand the effaced dialectic has to do with Stockhausen's awareness of his historical situation. By the 1950s, Europe had experienced such decay and destruction that Stockhausen could see no way forward other than to evoke a 'supra-individual' and 'supra-historical absolute order'—hence, the fixation on the 'One' and the almost obsessive elimination of everything not emanating from it (pp. 28–9).

In his attempts to govern many dimensions of a composition through one fundamental principle, Stockhausen's early works such as *Kreuzspiel* (1951) were hampered by a struggle forming the individual timbres, which were difficult to bring into a relationship with the underlying pitch or rhythmic structure. He found something close to an ideal solution in the electronic composition *Studie II* (1954) where even the sound-spectra are produced by the same basic material as other musical parameters. Here, virtually everything from the timbres to the formal structure is 'gleaned from the One' (p. 15)—specifically, a five-element series coupled to a table of frequencies, durations, and decibel levels. Yet Ulrich occasionally overlooks the astonishingly flexible way that Stockhausen dealt with kinks in his compositional process. As Jerome Kohl demonstrated in a fascinating unpublished 2004 paper, the peculiar history of *Kontra-Punkte*

(1952–3) includes a complete reworking of the pitch material, while keeping the rhythmic structure invariant. In this light, Ulrich's statement that 'from the very beginning, the piece emerged from **one** root' (author's emphasis, p. 19) does not tell the whole story. Ultimately, Stockhausen's 'hostility towards sensuality'—this, despite the peculiar beauty that many hear in the early works—led to a dead end (p. 29). But this perspective also seems somewhat problematic: Goeyvaerts thought of *Kontra-Punkte* as representing the 'baroque direction' in early serial music (letter to Stockhausen of 18 July 1953). In Ulrich's narrative, the inability—or unwillingness—to pursue absolute musical purity led Stockhausen to explore the ideas of Group and Moment form in his next stage of development.

To clarify Stockhausen's new orientation, Ulrich begins by citing Ligeti's description of serialism in *die Reihe 4* (1958/1960) as inadequate for Stockhausen. For Ligeti, serialism was fundamentally characterized by a dualism between what is mechanistically formed through the series, and what is the free choice of the composer (p. 33). In Stockhausen's Group and Moment forms, fixed and variable aspects of composition *both* became subject to serial ordering. Referring to aleatoric elements that found their way into his compositions during this period, Ulrich writes that by allowing 'the performers' subjectivity to determine aspects of the composition... the composer gains another area to form' (p. 38). In other words, Stockhausen's move towards Group and Moment form was yet one more step towards effacing (but specifically *not* sublimating) dualities by expanding the realm of the composed. This is a sign that Stockhausen's serialism has definite religious roots (p. 48), for if one series (a stand-in for the 'One' being) is only *part* of the composition, hierarchies and opposites form that destroy the 'all-encompassing context of the serial' (p. 49). Order thereby becomes a context in which *opposites* simply become *differences*. The more Stockhausen tried to integrate order and disorder within his plans, the more his work 'points to transcendence, enables contact with God...' (p. 50). At this point it may seem as though the ever-expanding serial mechanisms threaten to overwhelm the work, and in this context one can understand the many accusations of totalitarianism levelled at the composer (something Ulrich has wrestled with in his more recent work). So, Ulrich next considers the changes in Stockhausen's composition during the mid- and late 1960s, which confront

this very problem head-on in an attempt to reconcile a hitherto unprecedented artistic freedom with serial order.

Grouping key works from *Plus-Minus* (1963) to *Aus den sieben Tagen* (1968) allows Ulrich to address the phenomena of Process and Intuitive music together. The central question of Stockhausen's composition at this time has to do with the relationship between order and freedom (p. 56). While Stockhausen certainly did not abandon aspects of determinism and their concomitant demands of precision in performance, Ulrich argues that a good rendition of an Intuitive piece requires more than just expressing the text-score correctly. Rather, Intuitive music necessitates a kind of release from the ego, thereby opening a pathway to the 'supraconscious' (pp. 62–3). Ulrich finds a surprisingly apt metaphor for Intuitive music in the practice that some religious communities have of 'speaking in tongues'. As the author explains, St Paul viewed speaking in tongues not as a way to communicate to one's fellow beings, but rather as speaking directly to God Himself (1 Cor. 14: 2). Analogously, Intuitive music ideally facilitates a move away from 'self-centered behaviour' towards Love of the One (p. 74). Of course, this stage of composition ended abruptly after an acute personal crisis, and notated music suddenly reappeared with *Mantra* (1970). Ulrich views this return as a 'mediating instance between the spirit and ego of the musician' (p. 76) though it is obvious that after reducing an entire score of a piece to a few lines of text, there was perhaps not much more room to move forward.

For Ulrich, Stockhausen's Formula and Superformula composition opens up another wide field of theological reflection that counts as some of the best work in his book. More than just a singable musical theme, a formula orders musical structure on the large, medium, and small scales. Thus, the listener can finally *perceive* the formula's (and the series's) mediating effect that personifies the divine order while inviting musicians and listeners to participate in it (p. 82). This takes on added meaning in Stockhausen's epic seven-opera cycle *Licht*. If 'the music at the beginning of his oeuvre...looked away from reality out of desperation about it, in order to make the pure heavenly proportions sound in a supra-personal music, now [it] dives into the sphere of human destiny, tells about birth and death, striving and defeat, temptation and self-control' (p. 88). Humans are 'incarnations' of the Michael, Eve, and Lucifer formulas in *Licht* because the formulas embody more than

just character traits; they have their individual histories woven into them with their own distinctive musical turns of direction and intervallic content (pp. 86–7). Therefore, *Licht* is not merely an *image and essence* of divine order (as in earlier serial music) but rather *the medium of communication* between God and man (p. 93).

The metaphors of the arrow and the circle, which have provided rich soil for discussion in other related contexts, also figure into Ulrich's analysis. While the form of the circle captures the cyclic nature of many works (*Zyklus*, *Sirius*, *Tierkreis*, *Licht*), the arrow conveys Stockhausen's constant desire to push upwards towards a higher form of existence. The spiral (a synthesis of the circle/arrow dualism) serves as an even more appealing metaphor, since it symbolizes both unceasing growth outwards (without abandoning the centre), and increased concentration by cascading inwards. How big is Stockhausen's spiral? Ulrich gives a size of 125 'musical octaves'—roughly the difference in time between the big bang and oscillations of gamma rays. Stockhausen's intent, then, was nothing less than to draw from all elements of the universe, transpose them, and make them into musical experiences. This is why Stockhausen's music is not a mere representation of reality, but reality itself (p. 68).

While there are good reasons for using Christian theology as the primary lens through which to explore Stockhausen's spirituality, aspects of some other religious and cultural traditions (such as the writings of Sri Aurobindo and Satprem, and the Noh theatre of Japan) might have lent more depth and breadth to Ulrich's writing. Perhaps mindful of this lacuna, Ulrich considered Jewish and Islamic concepts of Lucifer in his masterful 2012 analysis of that character in *Licht*. But, there is also the persistent question of the role of the *Urantia* book, which has been considered in several recent articles, including one by Ulrich himself. Here, the author surprisingly dismisses the *Urantia* book and other esoteric sources such as Jacob Lorber: 'the basic direction of Stockhausen's thinking remained untouched by them' (p. ix). As scholars such as Leopoldo Siano argue, it is important to take the 'big blue book' more seriously, especially in the light of the *Urantia* pieces in Stockhausen's *Klang* cycle.

Relating to questions of concinnity in Stockhausen's work, one pseudo-theological connection might also be worth considering in a study of Stockhausen's spirituality: the nineteenth-century discourse on musical or-

ganicism. In a passage from 1826 that seems particularly apt to Stockhausen's formula composition (but also to his serial composition in general), Lichtenthal wrote:

Amongst the works of the great masters may be found innumerable pieces that are built on a single motif. What marvellous unity there is in the structure of these compositions! Everything relates to the subject: nothing extraneous or inappropriate is there. Not a single link could be detached from the chain without destroying the whole. (Quoted in Ian Bent, *Musical Analysis in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1994, 13)

With his book, Ulrich has shown us how Stockhausen infused organicist thinking with profound theological meaning through the technique of serial composition. While it is an important study by a knowledgeable and sympathetic writer, the book is hampered by a number of issues. Ulrich originally conceived his work as a study of theological meaning in Stockhausen and Cage together. The Stockhausen Verlag, while it ought to be commended for providing an appealing translation of the first half, might have also included the portion about John Cage, which would almost certainly be of great interest and value to many (as well as a generous gesture to a great friend of Stockhausen). Second, Ulrich could have strengthened his argument for a monistic approach by more thoroughly addressing writers (such as Ligeti and Jean-Claude Eloy) who have used a dialectical lens to view Stockhausen's project. Like Ligeti, Eloy also views Stockhausen's written-out music and improvisatory caprices as two sides of a classic dialectical opposition. Finally, Ulrich's focus on Christian theology to the virtual exclusion of other ideas is somewhat limiting. Although it would be hard to deny that Christianity formed the centre of Stockhausen's spiritual universe, any picture of the composer's life without considering other traditions overlooks ideas that often help to enrich the tapestry that formed Stockhausen's truly 'catholic' mosaic.

Despite these shortcomings, Thomas Ulrich's book is an important and appealing contribution to the study of theology in late twentieth-century music. Those who may have been puzzled at how Marcus Bandur could call serialism 'a philosophy of life' might turn here to discover one plausible *Weltanschauung*.

PAUL V. MILLER
Cornell University
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John Cage. By Rob Haskins. pp. 180. Critical Lives. (Reaktion Books, London, 2012, £10.95. ISBN 978-1-86189-905-7)

In addition to documentary studies, three main areas of research can be distinguished more or less successively in John Cage scholarship. Philosophical approaches range from esoteric speculations to profound reflections on Cage's reconceptualization of music. Music analytical publications based on sketch studies offer information on how compositions are made ('poetics'), the two most comprehensive contributions being James Pritchett's *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge, 1993) and Paul van Emmerik's 'Thema en variaties: Systematische tendensen in de compositietechnieken van John Cage' (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 1996). Recently, music analytical studies based on the perceivable outcome of the composer's actions have appeared ('aesthetics'), for instance Benedict Weisser's '...The Whole Paper Would Potentially Be Sound: Time-Brackets and the Number Pieces (1981–92)', *Perspectives of New Music*, 41/2 (2003), 176–225; and Rob Haskins's 'An Anarchic Society of Sounds: The Number Pieces of John Cage' (PhD diss., University of Rochester/Eastman School of Music, 2004).

Rob Haskins has now also produced a biography of John Cage. Detailed biographical studies on Cage have been scarce: Haskins's new book is only the fourth of its kind after the biographies by David Revill (1992), David Nicholls (2007), and Kenneth Silverman (2010). The suspicion of the genre already raised in 1975 by Carl Dahlhaus ('Wozu noch Biographien?', *Melos/Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 1 (1975), 82) seems to be particularly relevant for a biography on this American experimental composer. By systematically trying to free sounds from his own intentions and subjectivity, Cage scorns the theory of self-expression, one of the pillars of biographical writing. More than with any other composer, we do not need to know what Cage was feeling when writing a particular work to be able to 'understand' it. The decline of art religion, the second argument invoked by Dahlhaus, is even brought to completion by Cage. The third and fourth arguments, respectively irrelevancy in the twentieth century of artist biographies as moral *exempla classica* for youth and as catalysts for patriotism, are invariably solid, although the success of a composer presenting an alternative to the European concept and practice of art music is of course greeted with enthusiasm in American scholarship. So—to paraphrase