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Superformula v. the inner ear

Robin Maconie, ed., *Stockhausen on Music – lectures and interviews* (London: Marion Boyars, 1989), £17.95.

This excellent volume comes hard on the heels of a similar book by Mya Tannenbaum entitled *Conversations with Stockhausen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). Having already waded my way through the turgid and sometimes distasteful contents of Tannenbaum's volume, in which Stockhausen indulges in egocentricity to the extent of claiming to have been born and musically educated on the star Sirius, I did not relish the prospect of reading Maconie's book and was both pleasantly surprised and rather puzzled by its clarity, lucidity and readability compared to the earlier volume.

The format of the book differs slightly from Tannenbaum's: whereas her book consisted entirely of interviews with Stockhausen (her questions being of the rather crudely journalistic type, for example: 'Maestro, are you a genius?'), only the second part of Maconie's book – about 40 of the 170 pages – is given over to an interview with Stockhausen; the rest consists of transcriptions of lectures Stockhausen gave in London in 1971, such as the four-hour lecture 'Musical Forming', which were preserved on film by Allied Artists; other material is taken from informal interviews given on the same visit. Allowed a completely free hand in deciding what to talk about, Stockhausen covers the broad range of his musical techniques up to this time (there is rather less about the *Einheitsformel* or unifying melodic superformula, a technique he had then only recently begun to use) and he does so coherently and logically in an English of great elegance and consistency. The topics covered include Stockhausen's childhood, his thoughts on 'the musical gift', the evolution in his music from music of 'points' to music of 'groups', moment-form and musical form in general. Lectures on electronic music and intuitive music complete the first part of the book.

Maconie's interview which, together with a short 'afterword' from Maconie himself, forms the second part of the book, was recorded in 1981, around the same period as Tannenbaum's conversations, but, curiously, the authoritarian and irritable character of her interviews is nowhere to be found in this interview, perhaps due to Maconie's sensitive and precise questioning, which never strays too far from musical matters. A large amount of space is devoted to the *Einheitsformel*, of course, but Maconie persuades Stockhausen to elucidate its relationship to and derivation from certain electronic synthesisers, notably Peter Zinovieff's 'Synthi-100', which Stockhausen has regularly used since *Sirius* (1975-6). Stockhausen appears indifferent to the possibilities of digital technology which, in 1981, were nothing like as advanced as they are today, and it is a pity that a section could not have been added as an update on this subject, particularly in view of Stockhausen's extensive recent experiences at IRCAM, working on a version of *Kathinkas Gesang* (1982-3), with electronic tape (for those interested, a substantial article about this was published by *Perspectives of New Music* in 1986!).

Stockhausen is asked about the extent to which films have affected him and evinces discerning taste: Charlie Chaplin, for instance, although praised for moments of 'quality, here and there', is criticised for his 'sentimental side . . . the formal side (of his films) became weaker and weaker . . .' and Stockhausen dislikes 'the pie-throwing aspect of his earlier films, which is humour of a terribly primitive kind'. Stockhausen wistfully recalls the films of 'the wartime years . . . they often made me weep, because they were always about guys in submarines in love with their girls at home, going away and never seeing them again, but their love would go on for ever – this kind of fantastically idealized, fictional love made a deep impression on me'. Stockhausen waxes evangelical on the visual and theatrical side of his own compositions, looking forward to distributing videodiscs of his works and chastising the rigidity of traditional Western musicians in this domain: 'the public will not put up any more with the same old faces and worn out postures . . . this inability to move among European performers will have to go.'

Perhaps the most interesting part of this interview is the final section in which Stockhausen outlines his proposals for the curriculum of a good music college – a subject which is also of considerable topical interest in this country at the moment. For Stockhausen, pride of place goes to training in listening – 'listening to something you don't know at all, then transcribing it in the way phonetics students transcribe an unfamiliar language' – and he allots it two hours daily. Stockhausen attaches great importance to playing an instrument, if one is a composer, and insists that 'it should be *sine qua non* that every music student should learn to sing as well as play', also recommending that this should go beyond singing in a choir – ideally there should be 'lessons in both singing and instrument for everyone'. In the teaching of analysis, Stockhausen rightly stresses the importance of 'hearing what is being talked about . . . avoid overloading analysis with too many words and diagrams . . . analysis without hearing the music is a meaningless exercise' (university teachers, please note!). Disappointingly, when it comes to the teaching of composition itself, Stockhausen merely suggests a method of teaching students to compose super-formulas, rather than dealing with broader topics such as technique, inner hearing, etc. Lastly, Stockhausen recommends that every music student should 'go dancing at least once a week. *And dance . . . with a partner and to different rhythms and tempi . . . make your own evenings of . . . Austrian, Spanish, Hungarian, South American (dances)*'. Stockhausen places counterpoint, harmony and especially the study of the history of music below everything else, even dancing! 'Let those who are interested . . . do it, and those who are not do something else . . . they will still be well-trained musicians.'

The main body of this book, the lectures in part 1, dates from the same period as Jonathan Cott's widely-read *Conversations with Stockhausen* (London: Pan Books, 1974), a period when Stockhausen was enjoying a huge popular following unparalleled by any other composer of his generation (in 1967 his photo had even figured on the cover of The Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album), a popularity aided by the marvellous sequence of works which closed the sixties and opened the seventies: *Hymen* (1966-7), *Stimmung* (1968), *Trans* (1971), *Sternklang* (1971) and the final version of *Momente* (1972). Already, there were

ominous signs of the creative decline to come, in the shape of the first works based upon melodic formulas, such as the protracted and stiflingly unimaginative *Mantra* (1970) for two pianos and (jarringly persistent) ring-modulation, to be followed by the equally protracted *Inori* (1973-4), with its muddy, singularly unadorable orchestration, itself followed by a series of ever more grandiose and ugly pieces, such as *Sirius*, which culminated in the seven-opera cycle *LICHT* ('The Seven Days of the Week') (1977-), on which Stockhausen is still working. But in 1971 *Mantra* was brand new and it was still possible to believe that Stockhausen was the greatest composer of his generation. For someone such as myself, who is too young to remember clearly a time when Stockhausen was not working on *LICHT*, these lectures give a good idea of how fascinating and magnetic a figure Stockhausen must have seemed to a young composer in the early seventies. He seemed to have the answer to everything: improvisation, serialism, acoustics, notation, form, melody, harmony – you name it and Stockhausen sheds new light upon it, all in the same charming, suave manner with judiciously placed similes ('apple on the moon', comparisons with atomic physics, *et al.*), not forgetting to add a touch of humour at the end of a section, just to show how human he is (or can be). In fact, Stockhausen does have a lively sense of humour, far removed from the heavy-handed 'fun' of his operas, something which surfaced frequently during his introductory talks in the 1985 'Music and Machines' series at the Barbican: one recalls that, before a performance of *Mikrophonie II* (1965), he commented that 'radio listeners should be warned not to adjust their sets: what you're hearing is what I composed!' His humour surfaces often in the book, too, as in the passage where he is poking fun at 'specialist composers', composers who concentrate on one single aspect of music and are 'famous just because they specialise' (Ligeti, Xenakis and Feldman are cited as examples): ' . . . I tell my own students, if you want to become famous, just take a magnifying glass to one of my scores and what you see there, multiply for five years . . . if you see snare drums, then start composing around twenty pieces only for snare drums . . . snare drums on the roof . . . in the basement, big snare drums and very tiny snare drums, snare drums amplified and intermodulated . . . you will be known as the snare drum specialist, you'll be known in Japan, you'll be famous everywhere.'

In the same passage, Stockhausen is dismissive of 'style' in music, commenting that it means merely that the composer in question 'has narrowed down his field of activity so completely, that it takes only a fragment of a work for you to say, ah, that's so and so.'

This last point sheds curious and, by Stockhausen's own criteria, not very complimentary light on his music written since the mid-seventies. Up to 1971 there had been no such thing as a 'Stockhausen style'; indeed the idea would have seemed quite bizarre, since he had made it an artistic principle never to repeat himself, to make each work completely new and unprecedented. But since 1977, when he began work on *LICHT*, Stockhausen has voiced few new ideas – the *Einheitsformel* has invaded everything – and suddenly the concept of a 'Stockhausen style' has become all too easy to delineate: construct a banal melodic formula – a slightly incoherent sequence of small phrases separated by awkward pauses (which the players may usefully 'colour' by blowing or sucking tonelessly through their instruments, rattling the keys,

etc.), ornament each phrase with pseudo-Oriental turns or pseudo-militaristic dotted figures, provide each phrase with a pre-echo and an echo – then simply blow up this formula to whatever size you wish the piece to be and play it at ten or so speeds/pitches simultaneously; take care to orchestrate awkwardly for your chosen instruments, persistently choosing the weakest and least articulate registers and ensure that the overall effect is heavy and ungainly; finally, add a good quantity of embarrassing theatrical gestures and poses for your performers to execute, not forgetting that you must also ask them to count up to thirteen and back every once in a while. Has Stockhausen himself not become a 'specialist composer', and a specialist in a style of composition far less sophisticated and flexible – in short, far less musical – than that of Ligeti, Xenakis or Feldman? One wonders what became of the composer of *Hymen* and whether he can ever recapture any of the freshness and spontaneity of that earlier work, now that he has planned out the rest of his life's work with such remorseless rigour. Will he ever allow himself to forget his beloved superformulas and indulge again in some genuine musical invention?

As one reads both the lectures and the interview, some awkward questions start to rear their ugly heads, and they do not only concern the recent music. One notices that, although Stockhausen attaches great importance to 'training in listening' for music students, he seems sublimely unaware of the yawning gap between his compositional methods and the audible effect of his music: the elaborate scales of rhythm and tempi used in *Kontrapunkte* (1952), *Gruppen* (1955-7) and so many other works, are of little value if the music written with these scales evinces no perceptible feeling of beat or tempo. Similarly, Stockhausen is so obsessed with his superformulas that he has failed to realise that what is heard is a seemingly arbitrary sequence of pitches which hesitantly jump around (with an occasional corny glissando) – or, at the slowest speeds of expansion, an again apparently arbitrary collection of pitches irregularly and insistently repeated ad nauseam. To claim that this sort of composing is 'expanding human perception', as Stockhausen does in this book, is the purest self-deception: it would be truer to say that this music by-passed the question of perception altogether. Of course, Stockhausen is not the worst offender in this domain: few composers of his generation showed any interest in making their compositional structures audible.

The trouble is that Stockhausen's ear is a good deal poorer than many of his contemporaries' – incomparably poorer than Boulez's, for example – and therefore the music makes far less purely aural sense than their's. His emphasis on 'training in listening', rather than training in inner *hearing*, is all too clearly symptomatic of a composer whose inner ear is not on a par with his intelligence and skill in other areas. As Stockhausen does not forget to tell us, for more than 30 years he has edited and mixed recordings of all his works: 'I can't imagine any other colleague of my generation who has spent so many years and hours of his lifetime in a studio . . . certainly I have become aware that I hear much, much more . . . I can hear a difference (in some sounds) of only 1db . . . though everybody tells me, Herr Stockhausen, you're crazy, a change of 1db cannot be heard, it is a waste of time . . .' Once again, however, one notices that the activity of listening to and re-mixing studio recordings places emphasis on listening outwardly rather than hearing in one's inner ear (one's *outer* ear becomes vastly more

sensitive, as Stockhausen affirms), so it is no surprise that Stockhausen is such an excellent recording engineer – he could have earned a good living as such. But nobody with an inner ear of real sensitivity could orchestrate as heavily and unsonorously as Stockhausen does in *Inori*, and then describe the result as 'a joyous celebration' (it is as if Messiaen had written *Turangalila* entirely in clusters . . .).

This book is attractively presented, with an easily readable typeface and a judicious sectionalising of the material; Maconie has done his editorial job well and his afterword on 'Beauty and Necessity' offers some sobering thoughts on the place contemporary music currently occupies in society in general and in British society in particular. The one annoying feature of the presentation, presumably due to Stockhausen's insistent internationalism, is the printing of all Stockhausen's titles in the original German (where applicable) and in English translation; this gives rise to some rather cumbersome passages as ' . . . in some works, such as MUSIK FÜR DIE BEETHOVENHALLE 'Music for the Beethoven Hall', STERNKLANG 'Starsound', HARLEKIN and ATMEN GIBT DAS LEBEN 'Breathing gives life . . .'. But this is mere griping about an excellent and highly enjoyable book. Buy it!

¹ Karlheinz Stockhausen, 'Electronic Music for Kathinka's Chant as Lucifer's Requiem', *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring-Summer 1985), p.40.