

Stockhausen's Intuitive Music

by Hugh Davies

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Many people who are enthusiastic about the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen tend to be unsure about his pieces from the set known as "Aus den sieben Tagen" (= From the seven days). This is a set of text-scores, short verbal instructions with no conventional musical notation, composed in May 1968.

The usual reactions to these pieces, based more on what the scores consist of rather than on the music which is produced from them, is to talk about Stockhausen's recent musical interests and to dismiss the pieces as improvisations.

I would like to start by saying something about my own experiences with improvisation and what Stockhausen calls (in such compositions) intuitive music. In the last few years I have played composed music as a member of Gentle Fire and have been a member of two other, now defunct, groups, Music Improvisation Company and Naked Software, both of which were purely concerned with improvisation - Naked Software with no predetermined stylistic limitations (each member had a very different musical background), Music Improvisation Company, by virtue of the common background of the majority of its members, a so-called free jazz group. In the latter the structural and musical material was more restricted, but at the same time the interactions between the musicians were tighter. In both groups you could play in the secure knowledge that one or more of the other players, almost always particular players that one was "aiming at", would react to you in a particular way, without necessarily playing the sort of thing that you might have expected them to play - in other words a security which enabled unrestricted exploration of the new musical possibilities to take place.

In Gentle Fire we have a similar trust in each other. Occasionally we do perform improvisations in which nothing is planned in advance, but on the whole we seem to be more at home in performing our own group compositions, works composed by individual members of the group, and compositions by other composers which suit our particular way of playing together. The text pieces from "Aus den sieben Tagen" come into the latter category. In each of these pieces some kind of structural indication is given by the text. Some examples:

Verbindung (= Connection)

- specific rhythm and tempo suggestions ("... in the rhythm of your heart, ... your breathing, ... your thinking", etc.)

Treffpunkt (= Meeting Place)

- a structure based on a rondo-like form in which each musician must return at different (unspecified) times to the sound with which he began.

Richtige Dauern (= Right Durations)

- concentration on finding the appropriate duration for each sound that one plays.

Setz die Segel zur Sonne (= Set sail for the sun)

- "listen to the tones of the others and slowly move your tone until you arrive at complete harmony and the whole sound turns gold..." (NB One should read "note" for the American "tone".)

In addition, all the players (most of these pieces are headed "for ensemble" or "for small ensemble") follow the same instructions, generally independently but in parallel, which reinforces the indications given in the score. The results are very different from the structures and relationships that arise in unpremeditated improvisation where one is able to play more or less what one wants at any moment, in a comparatively self-indulgent way, providing that one takes into consideration what the other musicians are doing. Apart from anything else, the form of free improvisation is almost invariably a slow wave-like shape of alternating climaxes and relaxation, with a remarkably consistent average time for a single "set" of around 45 minutes.

Here is a closer analysis of one piece from "Aus den Sieben Tagen", called "Intensität" (= Intensity) which I have chosen for its apparant lack of information.

for ensemble

INTENSITY

play single sounds
with such dedication
until you feel the warmth
that radiates from you

play on and sustain it
as long as you can

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Nothing more is given. Looking at the elements of this text that relate to musical structures and procedures, at the beginning it has "play single sounds". For each sound a player may choose to play a texture more complex than a single pitch, which in some cases may become almost a phrase (the same German word is deliberately translated in some texts by "sound" and in others by "tone/note"). The continuation, "with such

dedication / until you feel the warmth / that radiates from you”, implies a development of this basic element, including the probability that the performers will individually introduce new elements from time to time, but always with the tendency towards increasing the intensity of their playing and their involvement in the production of each sound. Finally, ”play on and sustain it / as long as you can” gives an indication of the way in which the performance ends, which is likely to be either an abrupt halt by the whole ensemble while at full strength or a fairly rapid dying away as the musicians end one after another. No direct coordination between the players is mentioned.

Performing such a piece, especially in an ensemble that works together regularly and specialises in such areas of music, one is very conscious of playing a definite composition, even though the nature of it is such that one need only think the text over quietly to oneself before starting to play, and then everything happens intuitively - one need not be fully conscious of what one is playing, one ”becomes the music”. In many ways this is very close to a group improvisation, with the difference that - in spite of frequent comments from various quarters about the performers and not the composer being the ones who should collect the performing rights fees for such music - one remains aware of the composer influencing the performance from a distance through his score. And the structural indication in the scores discussed above ensure that those elements at least will make the result completely different from a free improvisation.

In Stockhausen's intuitive music, as well as in text-scores by other composers, what is gained from the point of view of the performer who works with composed music is the freedom to play the next sound or group of sounds when one is ready to do so, to select it on the basis of the context of what one has just played and what other musicians are playing, and to concentrate on musical quality rather than technique - instead of counting silences, playing complex rhythmic values (or rather thinking of them as complex), following a conductor's beat, all in addition to playing notes precisely written down by the composer.

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”Aus den sieben Tagen”

Score available from:

<http://www.karlheinzstockhausen.org/>

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