

SAVING FAITH: STOCKHAUSEN AND SPIRITUALITY

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ABSTRACT: Invited in 2011 by Robert Sholl and Sander van Maas to contribute to a proposed symposium on the spiritual in late twentieth-century music, I accepted, not because I agreed with the project and its aims, but to defend Stockhausen's character and reputation from convenient misrepresentation. Sin and virtue, spirituality and the spiritual life ask to be addressed in terms of actual works and personal witness – in my own case, not least given the composer's complaint late in life: 'You have to watch out for Maconie's nihilism'. The test of spirituality inevitably entails scrutinizing the motives of former Stockhausen disciples who changed their minds, among them two English composers of my own generation, Jonathan Harvey and John Tavener, who have since passed away. In 2014 the opening sentence of the present paper provided theologian and Stockhausen-forum editor Thomas Ulrich with an amusing starting-point ('Suffering? How very Protestant!') for just the second of a trickle of online discussions of largely pathetic inconsequence.

The basis of a spiritual life has to be acknowledgement of the reality of suffering. In contemporary music, a first level of suffering is having to endure dissonance, a second is trust in adherence to abstract compositional method in restraint of freedom of expression, a third learning to work with the unexpected and uncertain without loss of faith, and a fourth, readiness to cause offence arising from popular reluctance to accept difficulty, and an entrenched conviction that the only purpose of music is to be emollient and entertaining. These may look like philosophical issues, though they are nothing of the kind. There is very little philosophy (or indeed, religion) in the majority reasoning of musical commentary.

Oedipus solved the Riddle of the Sphinx mainly because he was a cripple. It hurt him to walk. The name Oedipus means 'club-footed'. That the fatal riddle is about walking is self-evident: 'What goes first on four legs, then on two, and finally on three legs?' To find the answer – that is, the moral behind the riddle – a reader has to understand that the question is not just about walking, but about the human spirit, and commitment to walking (moving ahead in life) as a moral imperative. We may rephrase it as 'What sort of creature is so uniquely motivated to progress in life that it learns to stand upright and move on two legs instead of four, and remains determined to

keep moving even after walking on two legs is no longer physically possible?' A conundrum whose answer is echoed in T. S. Eliot's 'Old men should be explorers', a catechism taken to heart by Stravinsky in later life, in Samuel Beckett's bleak exhortation 'Keep going!' from *L'Innommable*, adopted as a refrain by Berio in *Sinfonie*, and by Karlheinz Stockhausen in *Der Jahreslauf* (The Course of the Years: 1977). For a healthy individual the answer is obvious, since it is not a trick question. But for a person with a club foot, who finds walking difficult, it carries an additional moral charge because for the whole of his life Oedipus has had to struggle in order to walk, to get around, and to progress. That restless determination, of course, would eventually lead to his undoing.

Stockhausen is a moral realist in the high German tradition of Dürer and Matthias Grünewald. In Dürer's typically congested engraving *Knight, Death, and the Devil* the gentle knight is hounded by hangers-on and beset by distracting voices. The artist's underlying message alludes to the constant struggle, faced by whomever wishes to follow a virtuous life, to maintain composure and persist on a chosen path. Stockhausen's corresponding image, for readers who may be interested, can be found in the live electronic composition *Mikrophonie II* (1965). In Matthias Grünewald's many-layered Isenheim Altarpiece, opening and closing to reveal different images for different seasons of the religious year, Christ is shockingly depicted as a plague victim, pointed out as an outcast, his skin pallid with disease and covered with sores rendered with the same loving accuracy as the tiny daisies and pimpernels of Botticelli's *Primavera*; while on another level the viewer's gaze toward the young Madonna and Child, by a stroke of visual magic located simultaneously indoors and outdoors, depending on the angle from which the viewer is looking, is led gently down, finally to rest, at the eye level of an inquisitive child, on a small, glowing chamber pot, by implication freshly used, since the holy child has just been fed and drifted off to sleep. In the late medieval world of heightened sensation the transcendental is not merely suffused with the noises and distractions of real life, including sharp body odours, to a point where the viewer has to make an effort to perceive the conventional forms of faith as emblems of the triumph of the spirit. Indeed, one is led to conclude that the contemporary message of such art is that the spiritual life requires the faithful to show as much empathy for the destructive forces and physical constraints and discomforts inflicted by an indifferent nature, as pious submission to the caveats of doctrinal religion restraining the natural impulses of a healthy mind and body.

In Stockhausen's childhood in the 1930s the same polarization of views was re-awakening in an oppressed world of new media. For the great majority the movies were a means of escape from the tedium and deprivation of real life. The spiritual alternative to escapist movie fiction was a documentary realism dedicated to truthfully reporting the realities of survival. For Stockhausen as a child radio represented a magical new medium that controlled family life and also destroyed his mother's peace of mind. Upset at being constantly told what to do by an unseen voice, his mother persisted in trying to engage the speaker in conversation, and was offended and driven to distraction that the voice of authority refused to listen. Hospitalised when he was only three years old, she eventually suffered euthanasia by government decree, an event briefly recalled in the opera *Donnerstag aus LICHT* (1978–80).

To discuss spirituality in the music of Stockhausen it is necessary first to have an appreciation of the nature of the spiritual life and cultural tradition to which he was born; second to understand his spirituality as a survivor, along with Boulez, Xenakis and Cage, of an extraordinary period of economic and military strife culminating in the Holocaust and the atomic bomb; and third to distinguish spirituality in the terms Stockhausen understood it – or at least, as his music suggests – from the spirituality perceived in him by those who have since changed their minds. The views of Stockhausen’s spirituality acknowledged by other composers, however limited or partial, deserve respect all the same as the intuitions of fellow artists, in contrast to the doctrinaire pronouncements of those who are not composers.

All music is spiritual in the sense that sound is an invisible, relatively intangible, and invincibly impermanent medium. To a musician, all is transition. Mind speaks and sings to mind. Accordingly, if the parties to a conversation choose to agree on what is going on, that is the miracle, by default a miracle of faith on the ground that neither can be absolutely sure of exactly what has transpired once sound has passed into silence, as it invariably does. It means that all of us, composers and minstrels alike, along with journalists and politicians, are obliged to live and breathe in a world of hearsay. A world of hearsay puts particular emphasis on the indicative power of particular forms and conventions of utterance, relying as much on involuntary traits as on prior agreement to condition what a particular formula or habit of speech, such as a rising inflection at the end of a sentence, may come to signify, and thus how what has just been said is retrospectively to be interpreted.

In a 1971 lecture to an audience of English university students, Stockhausen cautions his listeners to rid themselves of the idea of the artist as a personality or moral leader. Do not attribute to *me*, he says, qualities you discover in the music you hear that are attractive to *you*. What you see in the musical mirror is yourself.

You are always referring to *my* music, *my* music. What does it mean, *my* music? It’s just something that has come into my mind and I am working all the time and that’s it. So: I am a *myth*, I am a name, and if I go away then they just attach on something that vibrates within yourself, where you are confronted with this so-called music. It has a name so in order to identify it. Like ‘Beethoven’ – who was he? He was a very miserable person, I must say, as a human being. And he is a myth for something that we are, that exists within ourselves.¹

Later in the same lecture, referring to a moment in the electronic music of *Kontakte*, the composer admonishes his young audience to believe in what they hear. What you hear, he says, is the truth. Your responses are true. You do not have to like what you hear, but you are bound to acknowledge your responses as genuine, and bear the consequences.

Our conception of truth of perception is entirely built on the visual. It has led to the incredible situation where nobody believes somebody else if he can’t see what it is. In every field of social life you find this need to establish everything in visual terms, because what you cannot see people do not believe. . . . Now I come to my point: when they hear the layers revealed, one behind the other, in

¹ Karlheinz Stockhausen, ‘Questions and Answers on “Four Criteria of Electronic Music”’ filmed by Allied Artists 1971 and included in the BBC documentary *Tuning In* directed by Barrie Gavin, 1981. Transcribed in Robin Maconie, *Other Planets: The music of Karlheinz Stockhausen* (Lanham MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005), p. 2. See also www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGnkZnm9MPw (7/12/2011).

this new music, most listeners cannot even perceive it because they say, well, the walls have not moved, so it is an illusion. I say to them, the fact that you say the walls have not moved is an illusion, because you have clearly heard that the sounds went away, very far, and that is the truth. Whether the walls have moved at all has nothing to do with this perception, but with believing in what we hear as absolutely as we formerly believed in what we see or saw. . . . That's what we are struggling with, and that's what will change mankind as gradually more and more people perceive this music in its real terms.²

For students of western music the situation is complicated rather than helped by the presence of a musical score, perceived as a chart or symbolic description of musical actions. In elevating notation to the position of holy writ, performance is reduced to a subjective reading or status report whose value chiefly lies in verifying a text's continuing existence, not what it means. (The more subtle truth conveyed by surviving traditions of ecclesiastical plainsong is that the soloist acting alone intones with greater clarity and flair, but also having the power to alter the inflection of a text, and thus change its meaning, whereas the unison chorus, singing as a group, is bound to convey a fuzzier and less precisely nuanced expression of the text, but one that is nevertheless grounded in collective agreement, and therefore less likely to deviate from tradition.)

The availability of western music in score form, to be anatomised as a species of literature in the absence of a living performer, has allowed unconstrained ascendancy over two centuries of musicology to a special class of clerical copy maker or academic whose only role is to authorise what music in general is required to signify and what a particular work actually says, along with what freedoms of interpretation may be permitted, all on the spurious but familiar ground that a composer could only have intended one ideal interpretation of a given work, which in his absence only the historically informed and pure of heart (meaning themselves) are authorised to validate. Over the past century the stifling effects of academic prescription on the practices and appreciation of modern music have created a market of dogmas and indulgences, extending to the virtual excommunication of entire fields of musical modernism from serious attention. In now claiming authority for the spiritual component of musical appreciation, a profession that knows so little and has lived in a state of denial for so long is perhaps open to the accusation of seeking to sanctify a position of invincible ignorance. At the heart of Schoenberg's opera-oratorio *Moses und Aron*, a biblical parable of the journey to the Promised Land, is a mounting despair, not just at discredited Nazi and Soviet policies of repression of modern art in the composer's own recent past, but at the ascendancy in peacetime of a populist rhetoric of compromise and denial of vision, supported and in some cases instigated by former disciples of modernism who have abandoned their faith. For Schoenberg, the point of no return was having to decide whether unbridled freedom of expression is in fact the true and moral response to public attacks on 'degenerate art', or whether the 'right way' was to continue to seek salvation through the self-imposed discipline of the twelve-tone method. Bitterly disappointed at the caricature of himself as the composer Adrian Leverkühn, cynically furnished by Adorno as meat and drink to a compliant Thomas Mann for his novel *Doktor Faustus*, and feeling

² Stockhausen, 'Four Criteria of Electronic Music', pp. 107–8 in Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Stockhausen on Music: Lectures and Interviews*, compiled by Robin Maconie (London and New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1989).

as abandoned and betrayed as Moses by Aron, Schoenberg breaks off his sacred drama at the end of Act II with the cry 'Oh Word! Oh Word! that I lack!'

To speak for the spiritual dimension in Stockhausen's music is not a difficult task, though a reader must assume, as the composer himself has already said, that the present author speaks entirely for myself. After more than a century of reluctance to address, let alone explain, the philosophical messages of a modernism conveniently advertised as in chaos and spiritual disarray, the world of classical music studies in the twenty-first century strives to reinvent itself – indeed, to justify its very existence – as a hotbed or haven of speculation about creativity in the artist and, paraphrasing Kandinsky, on the spiritual in art. Since among the many who do not compose, as well as the few who proclaim that they do, creativity and spirituality are by common consent invincibly mysterious, it is never easy to tell what those who engage in such speculation have in mind, other than a desire to comfort themselves and engage the attention of a reader. A popular disposition to pronounce without thinking on the meaning and viability not merely of the printed musical text, but the composer's intention in writing it, has nurtured a parasitic culture of bizarre and misleading fantasy concerning the nature of music and associated personality traits of the musical artist. Such simple-mindedness, to mention a few examples, has promoted the fiction of Mozart as a changeling, atonal or serial music as pathological or deviant practices, and Stravinsky's late serial music as a publicity stunt. Richard Taruskin, who is not a composer, has called for the banning of performances of Stravinsky's *Cantata* of 1952, that wonderfully austere and eminently tonal composition, on the basis of a single line of an anonymous sixteenth-century lyric on the life and death of Christ which happens to offend him.

That way lies madness. Acts of historical illiteracy are a barbarous assault on faith itself. The bleeding figure of a dying man is not a style icon but an image of the reality of suffering. We do not ask, nor should we wish to be shielded from unpleasant truths of the past. Whatever offence the recollection of sins of the past may cause, cause and effect are equal ingredients of a historical reality it is the higher purpose of art to acknowledge as much as to forgive. Dissonant events in our moral antecedence are no less real and truthful than the benign starting pistol and typewriter incorporated in Erik Satie's music for *Parade*: sound effects aptly described by the painter Georges Braque as 'facts'.

Introducing a recent symposium on musical creativity, Nicholas Cook observed that after Heinrich Schenker, the musicologist's appointed role of deciding on the acceptable meaning of a particular work, whatever the composer may have intended, has transformed through multiple generations of ideological ignorance into a muddled and flatulent discourse on the nature of musical creation along with the unsettling social implications of endorsing originality. Creativity discourse asks how it may be feasible for a composer or artist (or indeed, infant) to acquire musical comprehension, or for originality in musical expression to be encouraged in a healthy society. The language of creativity discourse is typically lax and incoherent.

There is a certain passage – it doesn't matter which – in Beethoven's Sonata Op. 14 No. 2 in which the composer, when he played it, 'expressed the reaching over of the sixths . . . by holding the cover tone of each sixth beyond its written value, so that it continues to sound for an instant beneath the higher tone which follows'. At least, so the early twentieth-century musician and theorist Heinrich Schenker tells us, conjuring up a vivid image of the composer – who, after all,

died half a century before the invention of sound recording – through what seems to be a kind of music-theoretical spiritualism.³

For a reader to object to so casual an abuse of language – and in passing, of Beethoven's music – is doomed for the very reason that this alas is the way the profession speaks, and the sole purpose of whipping language into a froth is not to achieve clarity or results but as a camouflage to protect adherents from observation and attack.

It follows that Stockhausen's spirituality – as expressed in his music – may need to be distinguished from the air of spirituality bestowed on him by others in virtue of his music's impact on themselves at an impressionable age. If I express an opinion of the spiritual in Stockhausen, the opinion is mine alone but, I hope, faithful to his conviction of music as a fundamentally spiritual enterprise whose meaning resides in what musical notes and gestures actually say and do. As I understand him, Stockhausen is an exceptional realist whose art is dedicated to the acknowledgement and expiation of suffering. To say so is to assert that a number of aspects of Stockhausen's music routinely criticised or disavowed by scholars, and repudiated by composers professing to admire him, are all the same essential ingredients of the way to salvation to which his music invites us. It is, to be sure, a far from comfortable journey, inviting isolation, misunderstanding, and fierce opposition – the very traits, as I see it, that distinguish the true visionary from the market player or celebrity.

Of British composers it may be said, as Gertrude Stein observed of English writers of literature, that their sense of spirituality is inseparable from their sense of being British and at one with tradition. Among admirers of Stockhausen from the class of 68, Jonathan Harvey's take on the composer's spirituality is clear:

Here was a man who was quite explicitly seeing in music the language of some greater consciousness. There was a feel to it that seemed to me right. A very striking thing was the quality of the sound, in the electronic pieces and in the [intuitive] music he made with his group: one heard this immersion in sound, this famous exploitation of the static sound [a reference presumably to *Stimmung*]. One heard values of an absolute nature, as opposed to the relative nature of music, which has an argumentative grammar. One heard sounds that were extremely beautiful, that sucked one in, in which one could exist as if they were another kind of reality. And I felt even in the more serial and strict works this love of sound for its spiritual nature, for its paradoxical ability both to speak of something beyond and to be itself more intensely.⁴

Such responses, however genuine, tell a reader very little about Stockhausen's music, or about his spirituality as a person, or as a composer. What Harvey (d. 4 December 2012) professes to admire can be summarized as qualities of leadership, conviction, tone, professionalism, and powers of rhetoric: in sum, not very different from the qualities saluted in a political leader by ecstatic crowds at a Nuremberg rally. What Harvey calls *love of sound* may amount to a flagellant's delight at the pain Stockhausen seems to enjoy inflicting – since he does it so much – or his employment of musical sound as raw sensation, unrestrained by polite convention, in the service of an implacable serialism. To admire Stockhausen in such terms is to yield to an

³ Nicholas Cook, 'Playing God: Creativity, Analysis, and Aesthetic Inclusion', in *Musical Creativity: Multidisciplinary research in Theory and Practice*, ed. Irène Deliège and Geraint A. Wiggins (Hove and New York: Psychology Press, 2006), pp. 9–24.

⁴ Jonathan Harvey, in conversation with Paul Griffiths, in *New Sounds, New Personalities: British Composers of the 1980s in Conversation with Paul Griffiths* (London: Faber Music, 1985), p. 51.

appearance of thought pursued in complete unconcern for the risks of failure or of being misunderstood, or indeed of giving offence. All terribly British, very public school. So intense a commitment to a world of extreme sensation may at least be part of the reason why Stockhausen is able by turning a switch to attain moments of sublime beauty; to a point where one starts to wonder whether the achievement of such moments is the composer's entire justification (if that is even required for one claiming to fly on divine autopilot). Such a view implies that the way to illumination in a musical sense is not sought in pleasing oneself but by following orders and engaging totally and without fear with the painful reality of unmediated dissonance. To think of Stockhausen and his serialism in such a way is perhaps to understand more clearly where he stands in relation to Cage, whose philosophy of abstinence, of emptying the will in the quest for spiritual illumination, is if anything more radically extreme. Whereas for Cage the new and potentially insightful arises passively within a constructed situation in time and space, for Stockhausen the same goal is more likely to be attained, and to a greater degree of richness and variety of effect, within a serially structured context of expressive dimensions calculated to generate unexpected and problematic but ultimately coherent musical results. For the Greeks, by a similar logic, the tuning of the mode ensured that any resulting performance would pass muster as a legitimate expression of the mode, whether or not it succeeded as a work of inspiration.

A sense of moral obligation to remain true to serial imperatives, or binding choice of starting conditions, is difficult to adjudicate but philosophically essential as a guarantee of integrity of whatever may result, for music as for an experiment in the scientific laboratory. But unlike Cage, Stockhausen is rarely content to accept without demur the spontaneous outcome of a generative recipe. For him the composer's task is to effect a reconciliation with whatever fate (in terms of serial permutations) chooses to deal him, as Leonardo counselled his students to bring into clear sight the composition inspired by a random patch of colour on a wall, and the painters of Lascaux drew their animal images out of the natural contours of the cave. For Stockhausen as for the cave artist the art of composing consists in working the products of serial inspiration into shape, not just accepting the outcome of a game of serial roulette. Stockhausen's concern for integrity and quality of finish is admired by Harvey and speaks of a genuine appreciation of craftsmanship and attention to detail. Where the two seem to part company is on the issue of sensibility, and indeed, of purpose. Stockhausen's music asks to be valued for its rhetorical conviction as a rite of negotiation or struggle, after the biblical tale of Jacob wrestling with the angel in his dream of a ladder ascending to heaven. The dream asks to be read as a musical metaphor for the composer's ongoing struggle to find an ideally harmonious scale of notes or system of temperament (*scala* of course meaning 'ladder'). The question is whether Stockhausen's view of music as a struggle and serialism as key is a path to spirituality his admirers are morally obliged to accept. In which connection they may need to consider the moral imperatives that are openly debated in Schoenberg's *Jakobsleiter* and lurk under the surface of Stockhausen's *Inori*, a likeminded composition for mime and orchestra in which the ascent and descent of actual ladders is enacted to the accompaniment of a Gershwin-like salon music of up-and-down scale passages. In this parable of supply and demand the soloist, perched precariously on high, gestures in silence like a character in a silent movie, or player

on the theremin, from a repertoire of mystical gestures related to prayer; actions provoking a supple, undulating music from the orchestra beneath, music of largely conventional tonality corresponding, in the composer's scheme of values, to a life of conspicuous decadence.

Stockhausen has burst the bounds of conventional modern music-making with something of a cosmic vision. He cannot possibly be dismissed. A perfect work, like *Stimmung*, is pure tradition. The chord that he uses is from the harmony of the spheres, and the manner of singing it again is pure tradition. But the megalomania in Stockhausen cannot stop him from inserting his own inane erotic poems into *Stimmung*. Stockhausen had [*sic*] wonderful ideas which often border on traditional ideas but to my ears the musical result has a kind of seediness about it.⁵

Harvey's contemporary John Tavener (d. 12 November 2013) approves of the novel language of serialism, or at least, its effects. Tavener distinguishes between breaking with convention, or conventional modernism (whatever that is), and breaking with the tradition represented by the six-voice overtone spectrum of *Stimmung*. He appears to be saying that a composer who can create an entire work out of a B-flat major chord can't be all bad, and by association that spirituality somehow resides in perfect harmony, despite taking offence at the composer's harmlessly erotic verses woven into a text otherwise drawing on the sacred names of a variety of sophisticated and primitive religions.

The British composer's enthusiasm is genuine but empty of content. He is unmoved by, or chooses to ignore, Stockhausen's act of hubris in appropriating the sacred names of other religions. To him the complementarity of eros and agape in a majority of world religions is of no concern. Based on first impressions and a casual glance at the score, Tavener declares himself satisfied of the spirituality of *Stimmung*, without asking whether Stockhausen may ever have intended to characterise the piece in such a way. Tavener's endorsement amounts to the triviality that *Stimmung* resembles a religious rite. But Stockhausen routinely dresses up his practical exercises in religious terms. Sacralizing the routine can also be an aesthetic ploy, in the style of romantic art, or Albert Speer's wartime policy aims for architecture, to disguise commonplace buildings as sacred artefacts: tombs in the style of monuments, or simply monuments, as a form of intimidation and to make them look good. Stockhausen's litany of 'magic names' in *Stimmung* may simply have been adopted as found objects of an uncompromising neutrality that are well-known and out of copyright. By taking on the appearance of religious artefacts, prosaic and routine habits of instruction – however virtuous they may be in practice – assume instant status and moral authority in order to be taken seriously and inspire unquestioning devotion in rehearsal.

In reality, *Stimmung* is modelled on a repertoire of pronunciation exercises from a nineteenth-century elocution method devised and promoted to purify speech and personality through cultivated efficiencies in voice production.⁶ Woven into the composer's ritual of practice

⁵ John Tavener, *The Music of Silence: A Composer's Testament*, ed. Brian Keeble (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 106.

⁶ A possible source of inspiration is Frederick Helmore's *Speakers, Singers, and Stammerers* (London: Joseph Masters, 1874), cited in Maconie, *Other Planets*, pp. 296–306. In the case of *Inori* a more likely source of inspiration is Bell's *Standard Elocutionist: Principles and Exercises* by David Charles Bell and Alexander Melville Bell, first published in 1860, a popular guide to English pronunciation with added hand gestures. That the composer was familiar with the literature of English pronunciation is evident in *Carré* and *Momente*, the choir parts of which adopt the notational conventions of Daniel Jones.

are momentary lapses from concentration and errors in intonation, not merely out of a playful sense of realism, acknowledging that such lapses are normal and natural, but emphasising the higher purpose that to master them is the entire point of the exercise. For much the same reason the erotic poems, essentially private jokes for the six solo singers, seated in a circle with their backs to the audience, offer welcome relief from 70 minutes of enforced solemnity. They may even acknowledge the complementarity of eros and agape in western religions, as depicted in the ecstasies of Saint Theresa or Saint Sebastian, the latter a gay icon dying to be penetrated by multiple arrows in d'Annunzio's decadent verses for Debussy's *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*. To accuse Tavener of not getting the point of an exercise in harmony involving carefully staged deviations from perfect tuning along with episodes of mind-wandering and thoughts about sex, is not saying very much. He may object that such impurities are against the spirit of the music as he would wish to experience it. Well, tough. But why then object in an earlier paragraph of his book (p. 94) to the alleged spiritual antisepsis of modern concert halls? One might at least try to be consistent.

In accounts of his growing up Stockhausen characterised himself as a believer of the Catholic faith. His first music studies were with a Protestant organist, Josef Kloth. As a child he defied the Gestapo and shamed even his own father by reciting a poem about keeping the faith in times of oppression. A number of early compositions, in particular *Kreuzspiel* (1951) and *Kontra-Punkte* (1952–53), are formulated to suggest shapes emerging or condensing out of a chaos of particles, like an explosion in reverse, but equally to be read as images of creation. In *Kreuzspiel*, over a 'primitive' (meaning, unpitched) patter of jungle drums and cymbals, gleaming piano notes descend from on high and rise from the depths to merge in erratic melody lines for oboe and bass clarinet, seeming to float on the surface of an imaginary lake. In *Kontra-Punkte* for ten instruments (no percussion), a work of enormous vitality and suppressed humour vaguely resembling a baroque concerto by Corelli, isolated blips and tics of sound gather and group into syllables and phrases, to be sucked in by an increasingly voracious and assertive piano. A similar condensation motif reappears, in more sophisticated guise, in the electronic composition *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1955–56), outwardly a parable in unprecedented five-channel sound about the three young men Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego cast into the fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar – a subject to be revisited a decade later by Benjamin Britten in *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966). Recorded fragments of text from the Apocrypha, sung by a boy treble and occasionally multi-tracked to sound like a choir, are interlaced with electronic tones and high-speed burbles whose initial strangeness conjures up impressions more of a soda fountain and clouds of luminous plankton than evoking the heat inside a bread oven. An American commentator has assumed from its title that this strangely beautiful work is a meditation – by implication, a rite of expiation – on the Holocaust. This I think is a mistake, both in a religious sense because the original text is a parable of survival and test of faith, and pedantically because the Holocaust was not a trial by fire for a select few believers but a policy of suffocation brutally visited on an entire population.

The undoubtedly dramatic impact of a pure singing voice appearing to prevail against an electronic flux threatening to obliterate it has canonized *Gesang* in cultural memory as a religious inspiration

even though Stockhausen's choice of text material could be regarded as a distraction from the work's more prosaic purpose as an exercise in distillation of coherent speech from a cloud of serialised phonemes. There is to be sure a spiritual or transcendental dimension inherent in the formation of thoughts into concepts, and concepts into words, but for a student to grasp it requires a basic education in philosophy and linguistics, subjects not normally associated with undergraduate training in musicology in Britain or the United States. An analogous ambiguity emerges in *Telemusik* (1966), outwardly a tape meditation on universal religion in which prerecorded sacred rituals from Japan, Africa, Indonesia and elsewhere are etched into the electronic fabric. In this case the composer's appropriation of religious content, while running the risk of giving offence, may arguably be legitimized as time-honoured conventions of sacred ritual that happen to correspond to natural acoustical processes, and therefore ask to be identified and reconciled with fundamental electronic and acoustic realities (interference of adjacent pure tones, the wailing interaction of bell partials, ricochet of slap echo, and so on). Stockhausen returns to the theme of *Gesang der Jünglinge* in *Kathinkas Gesang* (1984) from the opera *Samstag aus LICHT*. The new *Gesang* is symmetrical with the earlier work in casting a solo voice into an electronic maelstrom, on this occasion to be traversed by the departed soul. In a calculated inversion of mythic types sanctioned by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the role of the earlier boy's voice is taken by a female flutist as guide to guarantee the passage of the soul, through the fastidious intercession of a frankly bleak sequence of graded exercises in the spirit of a latter-day Carl Czerny. In a final touch of grim irony the listener is invited to identify the composer, formerly represented by the innocent treble voice of 1956, with equal and sinister force as the dormant or dying presence of fallen angel Lucifer himself.

It goes without saying that to appreciate these compositions in such detail a listener has to be comfortable with the otherworldly implications of the composer's choice of materials, which for a majority is unlikely to be the case. In their several ways Harvey's and Tavener's views of Stockhausen express their personal religious and emotional preferences and offer little insight into the technical and acoustical processes out of which they arise. Sanctity by association is often the point of acts of piety calculated to forestall any further inquiry into the finer nuances of spiritual implication that may subsist in actual works. The repudiation of Stockhausen by former advocates once they have attained comfortable middle age – Pärt, Penderecki and Tavener coming to mind, though there are many others – is hardly calculated to persuade others of the merits of their earlier profession of belief. (A noteworthy exception to the trend, among British composers, is Michael Tippett.)

For Schoenberg in 1912, as for Freud and others, the gramophone was a medium in the mystical as well as actual sense of storing and retrieving at will voices from the dead. To hear a voice speaking from a disc recording was construed in the terms of a séance or rite of communion with the eternal, since the sound of a person's voice was understood to be a mirror of the soul. A heightened sense of ineffable presence attended the new, alternate reality of permanently recorded and indefinitely retrievable speech and music, to be offset against the transient reality of live speech and music. For Stockhausen in the fifties, the electronic medium was already a field of dreams, or zone of illusion, from vivid personal memories as a

schoolboy of broadcasts by the Nazi regime masquerading as front-line news reports promising victory when in fact they were concocted on tape in a studio. As a composer of tape music Stockhausen was scrupulous in exposing the composer's craft as an undisguised ingredient of the finished work, weaving happy (or not so happy) accidents from the work process into the finished musical fabric in the interests of a totally open and transparent realism. The practice extends not only to incorporating a staged orchestra strike in the opera *Samstag aus LICHT* (1981–83), and offcuts from the tape editing process in *Hymnen* for tape (1965–67), but may even account for an unexpected encore in the magical *Lichter-Wasser* (Lights-Waters) for a cappella voices, the first scene of *Sonntag aus LICHT* (1998–2003), at the point near the end where a tired but ecstatic soprano – in a spontaneous moment of triumph presumably transcribed directly from a rehearsal tape – cries 'let's do it one more time, even for the same money!'

Stockhausen's abiding conviction faithfully to document his compositional processes emerges in different ways, among them a willingness to make adjustments in rehearsal for the sake of balance or improved clarity, insert live commentaries on the action, as it were, and even from time to time to go off completely at a tangent simply because his instinct prompts him to do so. In works combining electronics and live action, the spontaneity of accident tends to be neutralized by association with the timeless limbo of tape. By and large, Stockhausen regards the tape medium as an eternal present in relation to which the live performer is a flickering momentary reflection. The relationship obtains in *Kontakte* for tape and instrumentalists (1959–60), and with modifications in *Third Region of Hymnen with Orchestra* (1969), a New York Philharmonic commission in which members of the orchestra are asked to imitate, and also transpose, samples of sound chosen individually and at random from the tape recorded 'Russian Bridge'. Insistence on live imitation of tape material, when another composer might have seen the relationship of performer and tape as a counterpoint of equals, sets Stockhausen apart from (say) the Boulez of *Répons* (1981–84) in which there is at least an appearance of genuine dialogue between the six arpeggiating soloists and 4C computer. A policy of submission to the directives of the electronic medium suggests a perception of tape (or short-wave radio) as a source of divine inspiration, to be affirmed and imitated, but never contradicted – in other words, a divine navigational resource in relation to which the live performer is cast as a lone and potentially lost voyager in outer space.⁷ There are mixed associations arising from such a construction, not all of which are religious, and some perhaps vivid reminders of a childhood of radio under National Socialism.

It would be easy to say that Stockhausen's music is *all* about faith. In that sense the music of Boulez, and of Cage, and Xenakis, is also about faith or conviction of a religious nature. Serialism and chance composition techniques, including intuitive music, are rites of passage and also articles of faith. Boulez rejects religion, and yet his electronic masterpiece *Répons* is modelled on religious ritual (the 'response' of the title) grounded unequivocally in prayer, as a dialogue of the

⁷ For a rare example of genuine counterpoint by Stockhausen see *Mantra* for two pianos and electronics (1970), a work in which the electronic ingredient is in large part controlled by the two soloists.

terrestrial and celestial, rational and ancestral spirits. Cage is universally acknowledged as a shamanist preaching emptiness of preconception and total openness to the unexpected. Nevertheless his 4'33" (1952) of concerted silence stands apart as one of the most powerful spiritual statements of twentieth-century music, particularly in relation to a world threatened with extinction and in light of Adorno's remark that there can be no place for poetry after Auschwitz. Terribly scarred by a shrapnel wound to his face, to the end of his life Xenakis pursued a music of unflinching translation of abstract number into sound. All four composers can be described as extreme realists, religiously devoted to music as an expression of the transcendental, and dedicated to the study and resolution of suffering. For Stockhausen, who was brought up in the Catholic faith, the message of music as an expression of suffering and transcendence in everyday life is essentially Christian, a penitence to be experienced and ultimately redeemed in the agonising terms of the first Crucifixion.

On a trivial level, Stockhausen's spirituality challenges a listener's understanding of the meaning of dissonance, serialism (artificiality), aleatory (modular exchangeable forms) and other deviant practices, not to mention allegations of inhumanity (use of electronic media) and a taste for bizarre public pronouncements of a counter-religious nature including claims of extra-terrestrial origin, citations of Jakob Lorber, the *Urantia Book*, and other ingredients of New Age prophecy. At a higher level the student encounters procedures arguably conforming with religious ritual including noteworthy serial applications and forms as well as borrowed terms and modalities. I vividly recall Messiaen declaring in class with undisguised glee that Boulez's adoption of open form was a religious trait, since the seasonal rites of the Catholic church are celebrated within an overarching structure of worship allowing for the substitution of festivals and rites appropriate to the time of year. In many instances the relationship with religion works both ways. The mystery of the unison celebrated by Stockhausen in *Stimmung* and *Inori*, and briefly revisited in the delicate opening duo of *Am Himmel wandre Ich* (1972) for face to face male and female voices, is a physical reality of interference of unseen energies which the Christian faith has co-opted into religious ritual as an aural metaphor for spiritual possession, empathy and the fulfilment of prayer. Among oral cultures – in effect all of humankind, along with the animal species with whom people habitually interact – music is an especially powerful means of instruction for the very reason that basic acoustic perceptions of tuning, harmony, dissonance, identity and mutuality are uncontaminated by intention and therefore true and incorruptible.

Stockhausen remained committed to the difficulties of serialism long after a majority of contemporaries had abandoned an aesthetic of hardship for more comfortable simplicities of idiom. To imagine that music and religion are ultimately about pacifying a majority rather than being reconciled to the reality of suffering is simply a clerical error. In order to seek and experience the reality of harmony one has to start from presumptions of difference and separation which are liberating but also painful. Certainly it is not just about aesthetics. The constants of musical tone and rhythm, like the fixities of religious ritual, derive their absolute reality and substantive force in direct relation to opposing tendencies in nature to disorder and decay. Their message is: 'Whatever happens, these things continue'.

At the time of writing, late 2011, Boulez was rumoured to be planning an opera after Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. The play

is a philosophical, quizzical, tongue-in-cheek, Irish Catholic inspired meditation on waiting, a post-Apocalypse variation on the Psalmist's 'I waited patiently for the Lord' as set by Stravinsky in the *Symphony of Psalms* (1928) partly in the style of an antique, even primeval, wailing two-note chant. For victims of war, waiting indefinitely for something to happen without knowing what will happen is a test of faith. In old age Boulez made his peace with Stravinsky in a poignantly emotional recording of the *Symphony of Psalms*, and one could argue that waiting for an answer is also a defining emotion of the coda to his earlier *Répons*. How Boulez the unbeliever might have engaged with Beckett's morality of waiting is a matter of refined speculation. It seems ironic to have to point out that Stockhausen had already beaten his old friend to the punch with the orchestral work *Trans* (Through, or Trance) composed in 1971.

First titled *Jenseits* (From the other side), or more grimly *Musik für den nächsten Töten* (Music for those about to die), *Trans* is a comedy of extremes quite possibly based on a real-life experience of visiting a movie theatre where a mechanical fault is preventing the curtains from opening. Like *Inori*, which underneath the sumptuous music and elaborate gestures is ultimately a Cage-inspired silent movie on the virtue of saying nothing, *Trans* is a virtuoso work of music theatre about the mounting tension of waiting for the curtains to rise and the movie to begin. Bathed in a disorientating crimson light straight out of the imagery of painter Francis Bacon, a dense virtual curtain of orchestral string sound evokes a catatonic or comatose state, creating a visual and acoustic wall of simulated radio static beyond which unseen choirs of wind instruments intone a restless music of writhing and spooling ribbons of harmony. Despite infrequent loud interruptions of the sound of an amplified weaving shuttle ricocheting back and forth at speed over the audience's heads, suggesting repeated attempts by management at restarting a faulty switch mechanism, the virginal curtain of string sound stoically refuses to part, with the effect that audience tension continues to rise, goaded to whistles and shouts of protest while individual members of the orchestra succumb to staged miniature crises of anxiety and rebellion. To the very end the orchestra remains resolute, its virtue intact, the curtains refusing to part, the entire ensemble even daring, for one intensely dramatic minute toward the end of the piece, to fall into complete silence.

The spiritual content of what appears to be an elaborate and very funny provocation is revealed with wonderful clarity in the premiere recording first issued by DG on vinyl and thereafter by Stockhausen-Verlag on compact disc. Forty-six years on, 'the other side' is the here and now. Today we listen to the premiere recording, perceiving the reality of that event as through a window into the past. In doing so, the 'through-ness' of *Trans* reveals itself as a transference of conscious being from past to future: the message of transition, in T. S. Eliot's phrase, a realization that past and future are one.

In 2001, after the New York attack of 9/11, Stockhausen was invited by the press to comment on the event and he did so with devastating and seemingly brutal candour, describing the surgical strike as a work of profane cosmic theatre beyond anything he could possibly conceive. He did not say that the attack was deserved or that he approved of the loss of life or the motives of the attackers. His responses are of one transfixed who construes his questioners to be asking, Is it Art? and, How could anyone conceive such a thing? What he was prepared to acknowledge was that 9/11 was a deliberate action of stunning finality for which the perpetrators were prepared to

give up their lives. Such stoicism in the face of utter human tragedy may have come naturally to a teenage survivor of Allied phosphor bombing raids in the closing months of the Second World War. But Stockhausen's unsparing clarity attaches with equal resonance to the uncomfortable spirituality of the surrealist movement, in particular André Breton, to the philosophy of sacrifice as art advocated by Schopenhauer, embraced by Walter Benjamin and echoed by Benjamin's disciple Theodor Adorno, and beyond that to the pitiless but sublime vision of the Grünewald Crucifixion.