

Klang – A Tribute to Karlheinz Stockhausen, Freude & Cosmic Pulses

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Stockhausen's music from the mid-70s onwards has often been derided by critics and composers alike who have seen the composer as an increasingly distant figure caught up in his own fantastical world of mystical claptrap producing music without the brilliance and sophistication of his earlier works. They find Stockhausen infuriatingly difficult to compartmentalise and become frustrated when their expectations of his new works prove to be so far off the mark. Indeed one of the factors which separates Stockhausen from his contemporaries is the huge variety of compositional approaches found within his oeuvre – something which should surely be celebrated rather than viewed with suspicion – and one of the joys of the Southbank Centre's expertly programmed "Klang" festival has been the opportunity to hear many of the later works for the first time in all their splendid variety. We can now view these pieces as a logical continuation of the path Stockhausen started in the 1950s – the restless need for reinvention continued to the end of his life and consistent with the earlier works is an extraordinary clarity of compositional thought and a masterful control of the superimposition of musical ideas.

In this particular concert we heard two works taken from his final cycle of pieces "KLANG", based on the hours of the day. Although the series was left incomplete at the time of his death, Stockhausen finished 21 pieces that reveal a composer bursting with inventive ideas and exploring new possibilities until the very end of his life. The two works heard in this concert were both extended explorations of very specific and contrasting musical landscapes.

The first of these was 'Freude', written as the 2nd hour of "KLANG" for the two harpists we heard in this concert, Marianne Smit and Esther Kooi. 'Freude' was commissioned for the Christian celebration of Pentecost and first performed in Milan Cathedral in 2006 with the Latin text from this festival forming a counterpoint to the harp music, sung in beautifully simple vocal lines by the two musicians. Indeed there is something childlike about the simplicity of the musical world of 'Freude' which seems



Esther Kooi

to summon up the "Joy" of the title with an effortless purity and touching modesty. As so often with Stockhausen's music interest is maintained by pairing gestures and ideas down to their most basic level, small changes take on enormous significance and as in other momente-form pieces the material remains expositional, opening up and constantly renewing a world of possibilities. Simple gestures, such as glissandos and octaves, act as formal guides illuminating a path through the 40-minute duration of a piece in which a vast variety of textures never remove one from the natural soundworld of the harp. It would be difficult to praise this performance highly enough, the musicians were technically brilliant and totally at one with the seemingly intuitive but fascinating musical journey: indeed they seemed to embody the music within the performance and themselves.

In the second half of the concert we heard a performance of the 13th hour from "KLANG", 'Cosmic Pulses'. This is a purely electronic work, the last such piece from a composer whose lifetime was spent exploring the possibilities of this medium and whose influence on electronic music is greater than any other single figure.

Cosmic Pulses is a gripping tour de force of extraordinary energy and complexity constructed from 24 separate layers of melodic material which are looped at 24 tempos in 24 registers. 241 different

This article was downloaded from www.mariannesmit.com, website of Dutch harpist Marianne Smit

HARPIST MARIANNE SMIT

trajectories are relayed from eight loudspeakers creating an overall effect that the composer described as "the orbits of 24 moons or 24 planets". There is a duality at play here as one moves from an awareness of the micro level of individual strands of material to the macro level of the majestic whole. Despite an awkward technical problem with one of the layers near the beginning of the piece it was impossible not to be totally engrossed within the ecstatic counterpoint of layers with single threads of material vying for attention. Cosmic Pulses is a remarkable achievement and a suitable culmination of a lifetime's exploration of new musical worlds.

This was an extraordinary concert with performances of two late masterpieces by a composer who resisted settling for the easy option of repeating hard-won ideas.

By Jonathan Cole