

Stockhausen Festival: absurdity mixed with genius

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Ivan Hewett reviews the last weekend of the Stockhausen Festival at the Queen Elizabeth Hall.

The South Bank Centre's tribute to Karlheinz Stockhausen, the avant-gardist who wanted to bring the vibrations of the cosmos to human ears, came to its climax this weekend.

Throughout, there's been a fair amount of absurdity mixed in with the moments of visionary genius. I thought nothing could top the previous weekend's Orchestral Finalists, where a bandaged mummy bearing a gong capered among the players. But Lucifer's Dance outdid even that.

In this scene from Stockhausen's seven-part mythical drama *Licht*, a wind orchestra on steeply raked seats became an animated face - so the trombones represented the eye, saxophones the lips, and so forth. This "face" was afflicted with a series of choreographed grimaces controlled by Lucifer, gleefully resplendent in tails and scarlet waistcoat, who described himself (in a clear echo of Goethe's Mephistopheles) as "the spirit of negation", come to wreak suffering on humanity.

Disbelief was the only possible reaction to such a weird spectacle. But once this had done its work of clearing the mind, other feelings could take hold; amazement at the boldness of the idea, awe at the craggily powerful music, and eventually (to my own amazement) surrender to the imaginative power of the whole.

Its unlikely success owed much to the imperiously demonic performance of bass Nicholas Isherwood. Equally impressive were trumpeter Marco Blaauw as Lucifer's opponent, Karin de Fleyt as Lucifer's piccolo-playing messenger, and the Royal Northern College of Music Wind Orchestra conducted Clark Rundell.

This was Stockhausen at his most grandiose, but more effective, ultimately, were the pieces that made room for quietness and subtlety. *Tierkreis*, an orchestration of ten little musical-box pieces representing star-signs, had an unexpected charm. One piece had a folky lilt not so far from Bartok's folk-song arrangements; but the weird trombone ascent pushing against the "normal" music was a reminder of the otherworldly, inveigling itself into the human realm.

Most impressive of all was the two-harp piece *Freude (Joy)*, which mingled a sung Latin liturgical text into harp music of amazing textural inventiveness. Harpists Marianne Smit and Esther Kooi were simply astounding, playing and singing this 45-minute epic with great poise and beauty of sound. This, along with the many other recent pieces played during the week, have shown that the alleged loopiness and musical poverty of Stockhausen's final years is a myth. For that, the South Bank Centre and the festival curator Oliver Knussen deserve all our thanks.