

Klang: A Tribute To Karlheinz Stockhausen - Part 2

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The Queen Elizabeth Hall's concert on Friday 7 November was entirely dedicated to Klang, starting with the UK premiere of the Second Hour, Freude, for two harps.

Freude is a limpid example of the type of mysticism that characterises the best of Stockhausen. Starting from the instruction that the two harps should be played by young women dressed from head-to-toe in white, everything about this work hints clearly at the Christian imagery of the angels. This religious reference, which would be a recipe for bad-taste in the hands of most composers, is here effortlessly subtle and stripped of any uncomfortable ideological overtones.

The technical and musical challenges of the music are, as always with Stockhausen, utterly forbidding and have been tackled only by the two original performers, Marianne Smit and Esther Kooi. These exceptional musicians constitute Stockhausen's last find for his elite of superb personal performers. Both still studying at Music College in Holland, they learned and memorised the piece at the age of twenty-one, in occasion of the premiere in Milan in June 2006, and have performed it world-wide every since.

The piece consists of a setting of the liturgical latin text 'Veni Creator' for two harps, meaning that the instrumentalists double as singers. The choice of using the instrumentalists' untrained voices to sing the text is a winning one all around, creating a sound that is disarmingly unaffected. Sonority is without doubt the primary inspiration behind Freude. Stockhausen's early sketches for this work show twenty four little diagrams illustrating in some detail the type of textures to be employed in each of the twenty four miniatures. This final product takes the shape of a bewildering aural tour the force through all registral combinations, sonorities and speeds of playing, as well as attacks. Yet, because of the sharp attack and limpid timbre of the harps, comprehensibility is never lost. Each sonority is endowed with a sense of glowing transparency that acts as a foil to the strange purity of the untrained voices. The uncanny beauty of this music is undoubtedly one of the pearls of Stockhausen's last years, and will no doubt receive a lot of further attention in this country following this phenomenal premiere.

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By Delia Casadei