

Conversation with Bálint András Varga in Hungarian Television on October 3rd, 1984 in Budapest.

Stockhausen: I can remember that Stockhausen. I know him as well as if I had last met him yesterday evening. As a matter of fact, I have a retentive memory that goes back to when I was two years old. What I remember is present in my mind down to the most minute detail, including smells. There are hiatuses between the exact memories saved in my brain, and those memories are all interchangeable, independent of time. They are all stored simultaneously, vertically, and successively – just like in a building. Depending on the kind of association that surfaces, a memory suddenly makes an appearance. The same is true of me, myself: I do not really know who I am. All I know is that whenever I remember a particular situation, I know the Stockhausen who is linked to it. For example, I know the Stockhausen of HYMNEN very well indeed, with many details of the time spent in the studio. I see myself as if from outside, sitting at the tape recorder. I possess the rather unusual faculty of looking at myself from behind. Can you see yourself from behind?

Varga: No, no.

Stockhausen: Well, I can. I often see myself also from above. I can lie in bed with my eyes closed and see myself lying there and can spot, with total clarity, the mole on my face. I can look at my face in every detail.

Varga: It is somewhat like when you are dying and leaving your body you can look at yourself from outside. At least, that is what Raymond Moody describes in his book “Life After Life” (1975).

Stockhausen: I can look at myself from all sides; I can also walk right behind myself. When that happens, I am always a bit higher and can see what I look like from behind. Sometimes I even play with myself, in that I look at myself from different angles.

The same is true as far as events in my life are concerned: I can see myself in certain situations as I am working in the studio. How shall I put it? I can see my own hands pressing and turning buttons, or putting the tape on the machine, or removing it, placing the tape on a shelf in the archives, and so on. HYMNEN is of course linked to that. I see myself listening for months and months to the national anthems of 128 countries, listening to and checking them, or selecting an endless number of sound events from the sound archives of the radio, and so forth. In other words, I feel completely at home in the process of giving birth to HYMNEN.

Composing HARLEKIN is just as alive in me. But that is an altogether different world: a different country, an island, a particular cottage. Right now, at this instant, I can see it in front of me. A rocky shore with a small restaurant on it, and the timber house where I wrote most of HARLEKIN. I can see the oil that was poured on the floor to fight those horrid cockroaches, etc. All that has to do with HARLEKIN.

Varga: As a composer, however, you have left that world far behind.

Stockhausen: Travelling around in the past is like taking an occasional interest in one’s own back.

I do not believe that history has a direction. Nor does the history of a single person. Rather, all aspects of my work appear to me as a circle or a spiral but not along a straight line. I would never say “What I did ten years ago, I would not do again now”; or: “What I did thirty or thirty-five years ago, I would not do again.” On the contrary, all aspects are for me valid possibilities, like stones in a mosaic. It is all more like a whirlpool around my consciousness and mixed in my consciousness, rather than strung on a chain. In this sense, when composing a detail of a new work, a few bars from a piece I composed twenty-three years before might emerge in my mind. I would then stop and jot down in the sketch “Remember PUNKTE!” Or: “Attention! Think of the treatment of percussion in KREUZSPIEL!”, or something else along those lines. Things like that sometimes occur in my sketches to remind me of particular things I have found in my life before, because I want to use them and elaborate them further. I always have the feeling as if I had hit a number of billiard balls: they are rolling somewhere, will rebound to me, and then I have to hit them again to bring about new constellations. All my life is a reservoir of possibilities that I can use again at any time.

Varga: In commenting on the third region of HYMNEN, you refer to it as an experiment you conducted to find out whether well-trained musicians could make music the way you expected them to. How did it work out at the time, in 1971 in New York?

Stockhausen: Five rehearsals of two hours each. The outcome was rather an approximation. Owing to the fact that many musicians in the orchestra were good at faking, the listeners had the impression that the piece was meant to be the way it sounded.

Varga: How about now?

Stockhausen: Now it is far more accurate. I would never again accept an engagement with an insufficient number of rehearsals. Here in Hungary, I was given three 8-hour days of sectional rehearsals, and three days of *tutti*-rehearsals—for the first time ever. In the past, all I had were two days of sectional rehearsals, and two days of *tutti*-rehearsals in addition to the dress rehearsal and concert. Here we have had three days of sectional rehearsals, and three days of *tutti* rehearsals, plus dress rehearsal and concert. And I needed every single minute, since I used all that time to work on details.

Alas, up until now, I have never gotten anywhere near the original concept of the work, which is that the musicians ought to know the tape so thoroughly as to be able to react to what they hear. Actually, whatever has been played for the past thirteen years has also been nothing but cheating. I cheat, too, together with the musicians. In other words, after so many years of futilely trying to acquaint the musicians with the tape, I have now written cue notes in the parts, with the events on the tape written in small notes. This morning, I was angered by two bassoonists who played a fragment far too early, before the corresponding passage had been heard on tape, simply because it was written in the parts!

There has been an unsound development in performance practice, which forces musicians into a corset, due to the limited number of rehearsals. As a result, I have made a virtue out of necessity and written cue notes of what is happening on the tape into the parts. The musicians improvise with the material that is **written**, even though they ought to be relying on their ears, just as in other pieces that I wrote between 1968 and 1970. In KURZWELLEN, SPIRAL, POLE or EXPO, you react to music that you never heard before: you listen to the radio and elaborate it further.

The players, then, should be reacting to the tape, after having listened to it for so long and so often that they have absorbed it sufficiently to communicate with it, to transform the recorded musical material. In doing so, they ought to be able to rely on the art of improvisation, guided by certain symbols. But the goal is a kind of music which, given orchestral practice today, has no chance of materialising, unless there is a capable student orchestra with which one can study the piece for half a year, meeting twice a week. Each player could receive a cassette of *HYMNEN* and seek motivic material that appeals to him or her. This could then be elaborated further and in the process, the musicians can find their bearings – also in what their colleagues are doing. However, the cue notes have done away with the prospect of that ever happening.

Basically, no musician is interested any more in what another musician sitting right next to him or her is doing. Instead, they are like soldiers: they sit in a row and do what they are told to do.

Varga: A frustrating situation for you...

Stockhausen: Yes. However, much of what I have done in my life has a futuristic element to it. Most of my work has to do with a musical situation that does not yet exist.

Varga: In one of your writings, you describe how the performances of your music in Osaka lost some of their intensity of concentration and radiation once you had left. I wonder whether as a musician, you feel rather lonely once in a while. A Christ figure betrayed by his disciples.

Stockhausen: That sounds far too dramatic. I admit, though, that during my life I have lost some friends, some beloved friends. They made music with me and at some point seemed to believe, for reasons I cannot fathom, that the only way they could get rid of me was to kick me in the backside. It appears as though there is sometimes no other solution but to hit me from behind. I do not wish to mention names. But there must be something in my personality that makes some musicians eventually feel claustrophobic in my presence: they need more space for themselves. Instead of leaving in peace (or, as I always put it, by means of considerate divorce), they make a crash-landing. I do not like that at all.

Divorce is legitimate, it is feasible, and it can be the right thing to do, but it must be executed with empathy, charm and humour. In other words, there is a correct way of ending a relationship before starting a new one. However, that presupposes a cultivation of the heart and mind—something you cannot expect automatically. Some manage it, others do not. It is a mystery and one should make no judgement about it.

I had had more than three hundred rehearsals and gave many concerts over six years – left me. He had told me a number of times: “With you I cannot earn enough money, I could be making a great deal more. Nor will I rehearse so much in future. You make one rehearse far too much and it is always so arduous; you must understand that; you had better find someone else.” I replied: “All right, but please do honour the engagements for which you have signed contracts. After all, I cannot make another three hundred rehearsals with a new singer within the next year, and I do not have another one anyway.” But he said no. The offers he was receiving from the Met, from Bayreuth and a number of other opera houses and orchestras were too alluring for him to refuse. He is already the third singer in my opera *DONNERSTAG aus LICHT* to have left in discord.

The conventional world has far more to offer than my music can. Actually, my music has little to offer apart from work and usually about one tenth of the income that singers of traditional music can earn, once they have made names for themselves. Difficult.

Varga: Don't you see yourself as a pioneer of music history since World War II? As such, you may make it hard for others to keep pace.

Stockhausen: Yes, it seems so. Your question suggests that there is this prototype that is put forward again and again: this Stockhausen, born into a particular historical situation that brings with it a technological and aesthetic explosion. This composer is supposed to be playing a role—that of creating works, each of which is supposed to be a model, accepted by the others as such. That is also why he plays this part of a pioneer.

It is as if one was deployed in a war to fight on a perilous front— you are stuck there, you have no other choice. You simply go on.

It is true that I have an adventurous nature but I am also very pedantic. The combination of the artist and the scientist in me has perhaps produced a kind of composer that has been absent for a long time. I am to play this role and it is therefore difficult, apparently, to find like-minded companions, people who gladly come with me, even though it can be hard-going.

Varga: May I finally ask you a difficult question: What is music's role in our lives?

Stockhausen: Music is the most sublime art to connect spirits through its oscillations, its sound oscillations. Music is the most insubstantial material, the purest material, which directly impregnates the soul and the spirit—which shapes our spirit.

I believe that mankind will eventually arrive at a state where everyone will be a musician. People will then communicate with one another by means of highly differentiated music in which we shall no longer be barking and howling (or perhaps just occasionally). Instead, for the most part we shall be communicating with one another as supremely differentiated singing and instrumental artists.

To be a musician is the ultimate that can be learned on this planet.