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STOCKHAUSEN  
A THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

BY

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Preliminary Remark</i> .....	VII
<i>Preface: Music and Religion</i> .....	VII
<b>I. Metaphysical Theology of Order</b> .....	3
1. Historical Situation .....	3
2. What is Music? .....	5
3. The Order of Tones and its Theological Roots .....	7
4. The Artistic Application of Stockhausen's Metaphysical Theology in Early Serialism .....	14
5. Effects of Metaphysical Theology on the Young Stockhausen .....	22
a. A Non-Historical Concept of Time .....	22
b. Domination Thinking .....	23
c. Progressive Thinking .....	25
d. The "Dialectic of Enlightenment" .....	26
6. The Structure of Stockhausen's Metaphysical Theology – Summary .....	28
<b>II. Motives of Mediation</b> .....	33
1. Expansion of Order .....	33
2. Group Form .....	36
3. Forming Contexts of Meaning .....	37
a. The Choice of Themes in Music .....	38
b. Formation of the Serial Structure .....	39
c. Correction of the Serial Laws .....	40
d. Free Insertions .....	41
4. Moment Form .....	44
5. Serial Thinking .....	47
6. Summary .....	51

<b>III. Freedom and Order</b> .....	55
1. Intuition .....	55
2. Music as the Forming of Reality .....	66
3. The Failure of Spiritually Determined Realisation .....	73
<b>IV. Living Order</b> .....	79
1. Formula Composition: MANTRA .....	79
2. Musical Stories: LICHT .....	83
a. Transition: TIERKREIS and SIRIUS .....	83
b. The Super Formula .....	85
c. The Protagonists of LICHT .....	89
3. The Theology of LICHT .....	93
a. God as Light .....	93
b. God as the Power of Transformation .....	96
c. Characteristics of Stockhausen’s Theology in LICHT .....	99
aa. The Turn against Morality .....	99
bb. Humour – Fantasy – Play .....	103
d. Time and History .....	109
aa. Circle .....	109
bb. Arrow .....	110
cc. Spiral .....	113
dd. Final Remarks .....	116
<b>Conclusion: Stockhausen’s Œuvre as Spiritual Music</b> .....	119
1. INORI .....	119
2. Characteristics of Spiritual Music in INORI .....	123
3. Stockhausen’s Œuvre as Religious Realisation .....	125
<i>Index of Abbreviated Source Texts by Karlheinz Stockhausen</i> .....	130
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	131
<i>About the Author</i> .....	138

## *Preliminary Remark*

This text is the English translation of the parts pertaining to Karlheinz Stockhausen's works from the German book *Neue Musik aus religiösem Geist. Theologisches Denken im Werk von Karlheinz Stockhausen und John Cage* [New Music from a Religious Spirit. Theological Thought in the *Œuvres of Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage*], Saarbrücken 2006. The author augmented and adapted the text for this publication, but only in exceptional cases was he able to treat literature which was published after the German text had been finished.

## *Preface: Music and Religion*

Music and religion emerge together out of the darkness of prehistoric times; the reference to religion was always substantial for the development of music – so substantial, that when, during the course of western cultural history, it dissolved its ecclesiastical bond and appeared as an autonomous art form, it became an art-religion [Kunstreligion], thus realising its relation to religion within itself.

Can the reason for that be found in the peculiarity of the musical material? The tones of music are not directly related to reality; they do not characterise worldly reality like the words of a language – they do not portray reality as do lines, colours and forms in the visual arts. Thus, already the outward appearance of music gives it something equivocal, abstract, mysterious, that positions it next to religious mysticism;<sup>1</sup> music is spiritual, immaterial, and it is profoundly coherent that in Hebrew thought, God's creative spirit is embodied in the breath, in breathing – the material origin of sound and tone in music. Adorno had these contexts in mind when he spoke about music possessing a theological aspect, in its language, which does not directly designate, but which refers to the concealment of the divine name.<sup>2</sup>

If music therefore is a human expression of life, so intimately connected to religion, then it must become an important subject of theological reflection; one can only do justice to the theme of the relationship between religion and music if music is viewed in the entire wealth of its appearance. When considering the theme "Music and Religion", one must therefore be careful not to treat only church music, music for worship, liturgical music, or the so-called "spiritual music". If music as such possesses an affinity to religion, then not only music that explicitly handles religious themes is meant; on the contrary, music in its entire diversity is able to express religious truth<sup>3</sup> – that will become particularly clear with absolute music. Because especially demanding

1 As Dieter Schnebel says: "Ritual is directed at a numen, is invocation. Now, does this not apply to music as a whole, since its material – the sounds and noises – is already a mystery in itself? In fact music in its essence is a ritual, albeit an abstract one. – Speaking with Kant: Ritual 'an sich'." (*Ritual – Musik*, in: *Musik und Ritual*, eds. B. Barthelmes and H. de la Motte-Haber, = Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Neue Musik und Musikerziehung Darmstadt, vol. 39, Mainz 1999, p. 17.)

2 See *Quasi una fantasia. Musikalische Schriften II*, Frankfurt am Main 1963, p. 11.

3 As pointed out by Jeremy S. Begbie in: *Theology, Music and Time*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 3ff; he writes: "My guiding conviction in this book is that music can serve to enrich and advance theology, extending our wisdom about God, God's relation to us and to the world at large." (p. 3).

music is a comprehensive expression of the experiences of the world and of time; its treatment of the material and construction of form displays an ideology that shows more penetrating understanding than texts set to music or programmatically designed titles. That is why during the middle ages, music belonged to the seven *artes liberales*, and – together with arithmetic, geometry and astronomy – formed the *quadrivium*, the science of order dominated by numbers, which comprehensively taught how to recognise the order of the cosmos. Whoever – as a *musicus* – became involved with music looked into the image of the cosmic order.

When we direct our attention here to the association of theology and music, we will not be as general. Because in recent history, music, as all arts, no longer speaks a universally binding language. Rather, music appears to be the *œuvre* of individual composers. We will be exploring the *œuvre* of Karlheinz Stockhausen, who – as a creative spirit and a teacher – has substantially influenced western art music since 1950. He himself has repeatedly stated that his complete *œuvre* is to be understood in a religious way, speaking of music as a “fast airship to the Divine.” Even if Stockhausen sees his life’s work as a unity, everyone else who has followed his work has witnessed an often dramatic development during which gradual changes stand next to stark breaks and sharp turnabouts, until Stockhausen advances from a metaphysically defined point of departure to finally reach a historical, even incarnational thinking. Perhaps it is also due to the fact that Stockhausen, even today, has always had difficulties being accepted, since he requires the listener to follow him through quite different landscapes, and – at least up into the 1970’s – to realise with him one new point of departure after another. The thesis of this book is that it was precisely theological aporia that fuelled Stockhausen’s artistic development until he found a stable basis for his work in formula-composition, namely a musical language that makes it possible to situate historical individuality in a free relationship to God.

Thus, this investigation does not limit itself to proving in a general way that Stockhausen’s *œuvre* is religiously influenced. Rather, its purpose is to discover a specifically formulated theology by analyzing his works and comments. On the one hand, in regard to the music, it should be a contribution to the analysis and comprehension of the works and in concrete examples illustrate how a particular ideology can be realised musically using compositional techniques, and how, conversely, compositional necessities influence the form of thinking, of theology. On the other hand, in a theological vein, the *œuvre* of the composer is an example of what Paul Tillich called “religious realisation”.<sup>4</sup> The question is: How do religious experiences and beliefs achieve a concrete form? Theology itself can be called a “religious realisation”; it puts religion in the form of contextual thinking, such as a system of thinking. Another form of religious realisation is what is called “discipleship” in Christian tradition: the attempt to give faith a form in one’s own life. Between these two is religious music. Theological thinking is a realisation in the medium of the spirit. In this medium, thinking remains limited to the field of thinking and can therefore take on almost any conceivable form – thinking can be formed in many ways and therefore offers little resistance to intention. The projects in the planning of life are completely different; here, the material resistance to religious intentions is often so great (including the entire impenetrable weave of physical condition, character, economic situation, history, wishes and interests of the

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4 A book title by Tillich from 1930.

people with whom one is closely associated and much more), that what was actually intended can only be realised to a very small extent; this is further exacerbated by the enigmatic complexity of factors that influence life. Musical composition, in contrast, is intelligible. It is a work of the mind; therefore all form principles are basically accessible to analysis. However, it does not remain in the mind but realises itself in the sensual material of sound, and must take on a form in the relentless stream of time. In artistic form, the spirit leaves its own kingdom and works against the opposing (sound-) reality, which, as the “other” confronts the spiritual impulse. In an intelligible way, the resistance of reality to the freely hovering spirit becomes clear; in this sense, art is an experimental field for the question of what is realisable in which way. Because religious faith wants to be more than a simple play of thought, the observation of religious music in the broadest sense is highly meaningful for faith and for theology. This is a field opening up for theological analysis that has hardly been noticed in its fundamental theological importance. That is why there are no proven methods for the theological interpretation of musical works, which will become apparent in the course of this investigation. In that sense, two comments to begin with:

1. A postulate for an investigation such as we envision is primarily to examine the works themselves as much as possible and not so much to interpret the explicitly expressed ideology of the composer. For this reason, we have elected not to analyze the spiritual- and religious-historical backgrounds and, to a certain extent, the abyss of the motives to which Stockhausen occasionally refers. Therefore, those interested in Jakob Lorber or the “Urantia Book”,<sup>5</sup> will not be satisfied. Apparently Stockhausen himself does not think that these kinds of references contribute substantially to comprehending his music; at any rate they played no role whatsoever in his own analyses of his works at the Kürten masterclasses. That is probably because Stockhausen came across these traditions quite accidentally – something about them fascinated him, he picked up and used certain themes, pictures, names, but the basic direction of his thinking remained untouched by them. One recognises that in examining his compositional methods. Then it becomes theologically fascinating and important impulses can be gained; the common criticism of Stockhausen (not only from the churches), which sneers at off-centre esoterics, is primitive itself, unworthy of the subtleness of his compositions and the notability of his path of development.
2. The issue is not that Stockhausen’s music names, expresses, symbolises or foreshadows the Divine in the sense that particular musical expressions describe a religious circumstance.<sup>6</sup> Rather, his works express a particular religious position. We are not looking for single religious topics in the works, but rather we question how faith is expressed and realised in them. What is important are fundamental religious structures,<sup>7</sup> the relationship between God, mankind and the world. A particular perspective of this relationship is characterised in the

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5 About the relevance of *The Urantia Book* for Stockhausen’s works, see my essay *Christlicher Glaube im Weltraum-Zeitalter. Stockhausen und “Das Buch Urantia”*, MusikTexte 129, May 2011, pp. 30–36.

6 See Christoph Krummacher, *Musik als praxis pietatis*, Göttingen 1994, pp. 125ff.

7 Wolfgang Kemp, *Christliche Kunst. Ihre Anfänge, ihre Strukturen*, München 1994, p. 17, speaks about a religion’s knowledge of structure that expresses itself in art. Thus: structure is the true content; Robin Maconie sees this differently; see *Other Planets: The Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen*, Lanham 2005, pp. 152f.



œuvre, and that is why it is theologically interesting. Here, within the medium of art we are confronted with the same state of affairs as in the project of discipleship: In discipleship the Christian life does not express God Himself, rather it is an answer of faith that biographically concretises what is important for that faith.

Even if Stockhausen always emphasised that he, as a “servant of God”, understood his music to be for praising God, a theological interpretation – such as the one we are attempting – is a hazardous enterprise. An artwork does not begin to speak until I encounter it with my own questions, with my own interest. Understanding does not happen automatically, not even when I endeavour to be spiritually open; on the contrary, a particular perspective is required by the one trying to comprehend. The spiritual background from which I observe a work substantially influences what I will see – a “work as such” does not exist; but rather it lights up in various ways respectively, coloured by the perspective of the observer. That will become especially clear when we compare this study with the comprehensive book *Other Planets. The Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen* by Robin Maconie (2005). The latter reflects on the further development of Stockhausen’s music, but the emphasis is clearly on the individual pieces. They are shown in their originality and singularity and placed into the stream of the history of ideas (in particular that of the 20<sup>th</sup> century); the author’s often very personal associations control the focus and allow a multitude of phenomena to appear. In contrast, our study seeks the unity of the life work. It seeks the basic impulse that is decisive for Stockhausen’s work, that guides and fuels his development, and finds it in the religious question: What kind of music not only makes the comprehensible comprehensible, but also devotes itself to truth in a comprehensive sense,<sup>8</sup> thus expressing something that is really not expressible?<sup>9</sup> Or, put differently, theologically: How can speaking about God achieve an artistic/musical form? The weight of this question is what – according to the theory – fuels creativity – the weight of this question prohibits Stockhausen from stopping at the solutions offered by his early pieces, makes it necessary to proceed. This assessment casts a bright light on his œuvre; even if, as a consequence, many details of his works remain neglected, hopefully substantial aspects will be exposed. One should probably be more precise: “what is substantial (i.e. in a theological context) to us” will be emphasised – the reader must judge for himself whether it is enlightening for his own comprehension of the works. Just as listening to music is a creative process,<sup>10</sup> so is its interpretation; probably Stockhausen was also surprised about some of the categories with which we examine his pieces. Thus, this study is supposed to inspire and enliven discussion, but not conclude it.

Multifarious impulses can evolve, not only for music comprehension, but also for theological reflection, not the least of which is how to deal with the problem of natural theology. That involves the question of what the human being is able to recognise of God – independent of the revelation – on the strength of his own inherent reason, in the attempt to understand and shape reality in a reli-

8 As Stockhausen tries to describe the difference between “mental” and “spiritual” in *Texte 2*, pp. 249f.; according to Stockhausen in 1960, Cage also writes spiritual music, because he “settles everything.”

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 255f.

10 “Things are worthless if we do not do something with them. Listening is an activity.” (*Ibid.*, p. 252.)

gious way. Stockhausen is not a theologian of the revelation; he tries, only sporadically, to transform biblical knowledge into music. And yet as he follows the immanent necessities of serial composition, he is urged towards a musical thinking, for which the circumstances of incarnation are of central importance. This is an example of how art can stimulate theological reflection.

Stockhausen understands his œuvre in a religious way – in that way he joins his antipode, John Cage who, like Stockhausen, substantially influenced music history of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For Cage as well, composing has the purpose of opening up to “divine influences”.<sup>11</sup> Moreover: The works of additional significant composers of the avant-garde are religiously forged – in any case, the musician and theologian Dieter Schnebel is one of them, and probably also Morton Feldman;<sup>12</sup> the list of names could be effortlessly continued.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is not exaggerated to understand the decades after 1950 as a heyday for religious music, comparable with the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, up until now, this state of affairs has not penetrated public consciousness, astonishingly enough not even that of churches. Certainly it is understandable that in 1956 it was not possible for Stockhausen to world première his *GESANG DER JÜNGLINGE* in the Cologne cathedral, although this work set an element of the catholic mass liturgy to music.<sup>14</sup> However it is difficult to understand that 50 years later the lack of understanding, or even the pure lack of knowledge of contemporary religious music still dominates the situation in churches, except for a few praiseworthy exceptions. By examining the many great masterworks of new music – or at least exploring them – one can learn how today’s religious life can achieve a form, arrive at an expression commensurate with the spirit of our time, and respond to its questions using its language.

That is the goal of this study. It is to illustrate the theology of one of the master teachers of the music of our time and use concrete examples to show how faith can creatively achieve a form in connection with the spirit of modernism. Hopefully, examining the spiritual basis of composition will make it possible to more deeply understand Stockhausen’s individual works. Of course it would be ideal if the readers were encouraged to listen to the music discussed and to be inspired by it. In that case the fire of religious spirit which imbues these works would be automatically brought to bear without complicated analyses, and that is really what it is about!

The publication of this text in English was made possible by the initiative and friendly interest of Karlheinz Stockhausen during his lifetime; I would like to take this opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude to him! I would also like to thank Jayne Obst for the painstaking translation and Suzanne Stephens, Kathinka Pasveer and Imke Misch of the *Stockhausen Foundation for Music* for their assistance in realising this project.

Thomas Ulrich, Berlin, Autumn 2012

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11 I undertake a comparison of the theology of Stockhausen and Cage in the book *Neue Musik aus religiösem Geist. Theologisches Denken im Werk von Karlheinz Stockhausen und John Cage*, Saarbrücken 2006.

12 Heinz-Klaus Metzger refers to motives of the Kabbala in his article *Zu Feldmans Erstem Streichquartett*, in: *Morton Feldman, Musik-Konzepte*, vol. 48/49, München 1986, pp. 119f.) – in spite of Feldman’s unmerciful reaction: *Ibid.*, p. 59.

13 See Clytus Gottwald, *Neue Musik als spekulative Theologie: Religion und Avantgarde im 20. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart 2003.

14 See Michael Kurtz, *Stockhausen: A Biography*, London and Boston 1992, p. 82.