

Renovating our habits of listening

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LAST KONTAKTE: A KARLHEINZ STOCKHAUSEN MEMORIAL

X Avant Festival

At the Music Gallery

in Toronto on Sunday

In a recent DVD about his *Helicopter String Quartet*, the late Karlheinz Stockhausen mentions that he has recurrent dreams of being able to fly around the room or through the sky. I remembered that comment at Toronto's Music Gallery on Sunday while listening to his 1960 composition *Kontakte*, in which electronic sounds seemed to swoop over our heads like so many mechanical birds. *Kontakte* was meant to engulf its audience, with speakers on four sides arrayed to do battle with our default condition of receiving music from only one direction.

As in so much of Stockhausen's work, the complexity of this 30-minute piece is directed towards rather straightforward aims: to renovate our habits of listening; to blur the boundaries between pitch, timbre and rhythm; and to make simple things (a gong stroke, a piano chord) seem remarkable again. Also to focus one's mind on the momentary, in line with his belief that eternity "does not begin at the end of time, but is attainable at every moment." His interest in systems and control often led to mystical ends.

The performance, the last in this fall's X Avant Festival, was engrossing to hear and to watch. Pianist Stephen Drury and percussionist Aiyun Huang at first appeared mainly as bonded servants of the technology, obliged to dash here and there to bring the next required sound into line with whatever was happening on the tape. But soon one's ideas of cause and effect were also challenged, as a surge in the electronic track seemed at times to be triggered by Huang's mallets or Drury's fleet attacks on the keyboard. The physicality of the piece impressed itself on you gradually, and irresistibly. *Kontakte* was a pioneering electronic work, but it's partly a return flight into tactility, in which the non-corporeal element forces the body into new perception.

New perception was of course part of Stockhausen's program for the present and future of music. His focus could be quite narrow, as in *In Freundschaft*, a solo piece for clarinet (played on this occasion on soprano saxophone by Wallace Halladay) that might resemble an étude. Let's see how much music we can get, the composer seems to be saying, from a relatively normal kind of close pitch fluctuation, including trills. But you're not far into the piece before the meaning and function of a trill start to shift, from its usual ornamental or colouristic purpose to a much more primal expression of power and obsession. This piece is rigorously notated, right down to a physical choreography that amusingly recalled the horn-thrusting gestures of swing-band players, yet by the time Halladay reached the unstable high wail at the end, all this order and control had produced a fierce image of the irrational.

Similarly, as Drury pointed out, the opening minutes of *Klavierstück IX*, in which a single chord is repeated over and over, are very strictly notated. But no human pianist can play those chords without small unintended variations in balance. So what one ended up hearing (what I heard, at any rate) was a kind of contrapuntal melody in which the ear was entirely complicit, as it perceived one note or another as the next link in a melodic chain. Again, a scenario of great order had allowed the uncontrollable to occupy the work.

Sunday's concert was offered as a memorial to an extremely influential figure, who died last December at the age of 79. But can we properly remember what has scarcely been known in the first place? In North America, Stockhausen's music barely exists as part of a public repertoire. In a familiar irony, his death has prompted more performances in a shorter time than we ever got during his lifetime.

The next big Canadian Stockhausen event is happening at the University of Montreal, which is hosting an Événement Stockhausen Nov. 6-11, including performances and discussions at various campus locations. One program from those events travels to Toronto's Enwave Theatre on Nov. 15, as part of New Music Concerts' current season.

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