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Karlheinz Stockhausen's stage cycle Licht. Musical theatre of the world

ABSTRACT: The main idea of the paper is a presentation of the stage cycle *Licht*, absorbing the composer for over one-third of his active creative life. The question arises as to the generic affiliation of Stockhausen's *opus magnum*: close to operatic works by Luciano Berio and Mauricio Kagel or to pop productions of works by Philip Glass? Analysing the subject matter and content of *Licht*, as well as its message and the means of expression employed, it is difficult not to discern the unification, within a single work, of what might appear to be contrasting musical genres and kinds of theatre (mystery play, expressionist drama, happening). It is worth remembering that the composer himself does not employ any specific generic term except for *Opernzyklus*. He often, however, refers to the forms and genres of theatre, cultivated in many different parts of the world, which have inspired him (e.g. in Malaysia, Japan, Bali, the USA), and he admits to the evolution of his views on faith. Can the substance of *Licht* be reduced to a common denominator? Can the heptalogy be called 'sacred' theatre? Or – on the contrary – an extremely profane, 'pagan' avant-garde spectacle?

KEYWORDS: pitch, Karlheinz Stockhausen, stage-cycle, *Licht*, world-theatre, *The Urantia Book*, Michael, Eva, Lucifer, formula-composition, Hans Urs von Balthasar

Karlheinz Stockhausen composed a total of around 360 works, minor and monumental, vocal and instrumental, in a variety of forms and genres. He was associated chiefly with the avant-garde of the Darmstadt School, with experimentation in the organisation of musical material, sound, formal continuum and musical notation. Yet the most recent studies on Stockhausen's oeuvre, particularly those dealing with his late output – almost unknown in Poland – show another side to this oeuvre. They emphasise the value of these works' message, their extra-musical inspiration, religious content, the ritualisation of their course and the particular experiences that accompany their performance and reception. Stockhausen himself often defined his work as spiritual music (*geistliche Musik*), which he shared with listeners in a special kind of joint mystical celebration.

On each occasion, this peculiar ritual had a strictly defined aim and motto, such as the watchword of the 2005 Summer Course on Stockhausen's music: *Lernen am Werk* (studying the work) – its notation, its compositional

ideas and above all its function, which the composer ultimately defined as follows:

The music of the future must be spiritual music, dedicated to God. It will be an endless prayer, but not only in the form of a Catholic mass, but in other forms of worship from our whole planet, thereby integrating the religious symbolism of the whole world.¹

These words, as indeed the phenomenon of Stockhausen's sacralisation of his own life, encourage one, on one hand, to present his work within the broader context of specific creative stances, both avant-garde and traditionally oriented. On the other hand, they inspire one to examine the composer's last works – works belonging to a special kind of music theatre, linked to the mysterious domain of the sacred within many cultural circles – and to attempt to define the genre and type of this theatre.

Analysing Stockhausen's work dating from before the *Licht* cycle (1977), one notes a distinct area of themes that had long been of interest to the composer. These were always weighty themes, connected with the spiritual domain of man's life as most broadly understood. Stockhausen turned to themes linked with faith in God, seeking His presence in the symbolic organisation of the cosmos and its influence on life on Earth. The composer found a synthesis of these strands in *The Urantia Book* – a record of the 'Commandments' of extraterrestrial beings which decided to reveal to humankind new views on learning, philosophy and religion through a revision of the Holy Scripture.² In the 1970s, Stockhausen had the opportunity to acquaint himself with the contents of the *Book*, which clearly gave him answers to the questions which had long preoccupied him: on the origins of man, the essence of God and the existence of other, extraterrestrial civilisations. The essence of the *Book's* message consists of revelations of the 'truth' about the cosmos. On becoming more closely acquainted with its successive chapters, one is struck by the detailed descriptions of the structure of the universe and of the material and spiritual entities that exist within it, and also by the consistently elaborated new history of creation and of the end of the world. The *Book* also provides new definitions of the figures of God and the Son of God, as well as Lucifer, Adam and Eve. Stockhausen drew on these descriptions when shaping the

¹ Karlheinz Stockhausen, unauthorised quotation of an utterance from a composition seminar, remembered and translated by the author – a participant in the Eighth Stockhausen Courses (Kürten, 2005).

² The Urantia Brotherhood, founded by the psychiatrist Dr William S. Sadler (1875–1969), the first person to be 'contacted', is not regarded as a sect. Its work is confined to popularising the 196 chapters of revelation among the widest readership possible. *The Urantia Book* was first published by the *Urantia Foundation*, Chicago, 1955.

characters of the cycle and also choosing the heptalogy's title. Since time immemorial, *Licht* (Light) has constituted on one hand a metaphor of the soul and of divinity and on the other a symbol of inner illumination and the presence of a cosmic power, personifying supreme good and truth. Christ was defined as the light of the world, Buddha as the light of Asia, Krishna as the lord of light, Allah as the light of heaven and earth. In mythological stories, at the moment of the greatest darkness, hope was always brought by a flash of light; man, at the moment of his birth and at the moment of his death, heads towards the light; and the function of art – as defined by Joseph Campbell, among others – is to reveal the light in created objects.³ In *The Urantia Book*, as well, the notion of light appears many times. Its definition can be found in the foreword (guide) of the *Book*, where we read that the universe shines with three kinds of light:

- material light
- intellectual perspicacity (*wit, intuition*)
- spiritual light (*the manifestation of spiritual entities*)⁴

This idea is conveyed in Stockhausen's cycle by the three main figures, represented on the stage by three persons, a singer, an instrumentalist and a dancer: Lucifer, the personification of arrogance and the material world (shown as a bass, trombone and mime); Eve, the symbol of intuition (soprano, basset horn, dancer), and Michael, the supreme being, the embodiment of God on Earth (tenor, trumpeter, dancer).

Three parts of the week-long cycle (three days) foreground the work's main characters: *Donnerstag* is Michael's day – the day of life and learning; *Samstag* belongs to Lucifer, it is the day of death; *Montag* is Eve's day, the day of birth. The other days develop the action, bringing us such events as the war between Michael and Lucifer (*Dienstag*), the tempting of Eve (*Freitag*) and the cooperation of all three protagonists (*Mittwoch*). Of the mystical bond between Eve and Michael in *Sonntag*, an offspring is born in *Montag aus Licht*. And thus the 'endless spiral' (*ewige Spirale*) lasts a week.⁵ The coherent substance of the cycle is the original interpretation of religious motifs from the whole world, of themes from ancient, mythological, biblical times in direct connection with contemporary forms of worship.

Each day of the week (each part of the cycle) is also linked to phenomena strictly specified by the composer: planets, colours, elements (which become the *dramatis personae* in *Samstag aus Licht*, in scene I, 'The dream of Lucifer'), senses (also present in *Samstag*, in scene II, 'Kathinka's Song' as 'Luci-

³ Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York, 1988), trans. Ireneusz Kania as *Potęga mitu* (Kraków, 2007), 128.

⁴ <<http://www.urantia.org>> accessed 12 September 2008

⁵ Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Texte zur Musik 1977-1984*, vol. 6, *Interpretation* (Cologne, 1989), 156.

fer's Requiem') and graphic symbolical figures.⁶ This forms a sort of 'horoscope' of each separate part of the cycle and of the heptalogy as a whole.

Also of crucial significance in the cycle – on many levels of the work's organisation – are numbers. Stockhausen is clearly one of those composers enchanted by the magic of numbers, which reveal the principles governing the creation of the world and the laws of the functioning of time and space. He most often uses the common sequence 1 2 3 (unity, duality and synthesis) in selecting the characters of successive scenes in the cycle. He also frequently employs the sacred numbers 7 and 3 in the overall architectonic conception of the cycle. For defining other parameters of the work, the composer makes use, among other things, of the first seven values in the Fibonacci series (1 2 3 5 8 13 21), proposing – after the fashion of the Magister Ludi, the protagonist of Herman Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* – a complex game, comprehensible to the initiated alone. Not by accident is the subject of 'game' evoked here. In many scenes of the heptalogy, the characters play a game with one another: a game of love, like Michael and Eve in the scene 'Mondeva' from *Donnerstag aus Licht*; a strategic war game and a game with time, like Michael and Lucifer in 'Jahreslauf', from *Dienstag aus Licht*; a sporting game – the pairs of characters from *Freitag aus Licht*; finally, play, like the children's 'Hullabaloo' in *Montag aus Licht*.

The heptalogy contains scenes without text (instrumental) and with words. The verbal layer of the work consists of various kinds of text, both written by the composer and quoted from elsewhere, constituting either a text that is spoken or sung on the stage or else simply giving an idea of the dramatic situation. There is a clear distinction, characteristic of drama, between the main text and the secondary text. Both are placed in the score of the work, which represents the most detailed notation possible of the composer's conception of the dramatic, musical and scenic material. The texts were written, and are performed, in various languages. German, of course, is predominant, but the composer also wrote or quoted sizeable parts of the text in English, passages in Hindi, Chinese, Spanish, Italian and Kiswahili, and also single words in French and Dutch. In some places of his work, the composer also proposes his own, specially devised, language or merely transformations of selected syllables, which fulfil a colouristic function and convey the atmosphere rather than any specific content, in line with Bodhidharma's thesis:

⁶ I would recall here the thesis of Mieczysław Wallis: 'the predilection for symbolism in great artists in their later years is unquestionable', in *Późna twórczość wielkich artystów* [The late work of great artists] (Warsaw, 1975), 189–190.

'The ultimate truth is beyond words. Words are illusions. They are no different from images that occur in dreams.'⁷

The successive parts of the cycle were written more or less every three and a half years, up to the last part, *Sonntag aus Licht*, completed in 2005. Also interestingly planned was the time of the work's performances, resulting from the structure of the particular parts of the cycle. Each part begins with a *greeting* (Gruss) and ends with a *farewell* (Abschied). The framework here clearly refers to the course of a rite, in which the sanctified time, the time of ritual, is separated from normal time by an introduction – an *exordium, introitus* (what Arnold van Gennep calls separation from the 'ordinary') – and officially closed by the dismissal of the faithful (e.g. the *Ite missa est* that ends the Catholic mass; van Gennep calls this the phase of aggregation, of re-entering life in a new guise).⁸ The Gruss – Abschied scenes were written with an atypical realisation in mind. The greetings are performed before the spectators take their seats in the auditorium; the farewell, when the audience leaves the theatre. The composer greets them with his music while they are still in the foyer (occasionally when they are still outside the theatre) and bids them farewell after the spectacle in a similar way. It is also worth noting that the real time of a performance does not always coincide with the duration of the music. We can distinguish here three orders to the organisation of the passing of time in the stage performance of *Licht*: the first is the conventional, consecutive sequence of scenes; the second is the overlapping of several layers, e.g. successive scenes in the action counterpointed with previously recorded 'scenes from tape', presented together against the static background of electronic or choral music; finally, the third order involves the use of the same musical material but presented by different forces in two rooms twice over, so that the audience can listen to both versions. The most difficult aspect of the work to define is the time of the action. As in fairy tales or myths, the action unfolds 'at a time unknown, in a place unknown'. The fairytale opening 'once upon a time...' does not apply here, as one sometimes has the impression that many of the events presented in the work are yet to take place or are occurring now, but not here, rather in some parallel dimension.

Licht was conceived as a 'formula composition' (*Formelkomposition*), like its predecessors *Inori* and *Mantra*. This means that the entire musical mate-

⁷ Cit. after Paul Carlson, 'Karlheinz Stockhausen: LICHT BILDER (World Premiere) or What do You Call 25 Guys Sitting Around a TV Set Watching the World Series?', unpublished article held in the archive of the Stockhausen Foundation, 2006.

⁸ Van Gennep's classification is given by Victor Turner in his work *The Ritual Process Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, 1969); cf. Dariusz Kosiński, Anna Wypych-Gawrońska, Anna Stafiej, Agnieszka Marszałek, Małgorzata Sugiera and Joanna Leśniewska, *Słownik wiedzy o teatrze* [Dictionary of the theatre] (Bielsko-Biała, 2007), 17.

rial – pitch and rhythm, duration and tempo, dynamics and expression – was derived from a pre-prepared pattern, matrix or ‘DNA’ of the work, as Stockhausen calls the superformula of *Licht*. ‘According to the fantastic concept of the matrix, every atom contains a complete universe [...]. Potentially each cell contains a complete matrix of the whole body, that particular one and not any other’, says Stockhausen,⁹ stressing at the same time the essence of the formula, which is something more than a repeated leitmotif, psychological profile, theme or series. According to Stockhausen, the formula is to contain everything: ‘melody notes, echos, pre-echos, scales, semi-noises, coloured pauses, empty pauses, improvisations on preceding melodic element, etc’.¹⁰

In the cycle *Licht*, this matrix is exploited in three variants of the organisation of the work.

Variant one, the most complex, is the entire superformula (*Superformel*), which encompasses three formulas corresponding to the three main characters of the cycle: Michael, Eve and Lucifer.¹¹ Its eighteen symbolic constituent bars are divided among seven segments, which are then used in the composition of the seven successive parts of the cycle. The superformula governs above all the duration and tempo of the successive parts of the cycle. The sixty symbolic time units (for the sake of simplicity, we shall call them super-time-crotchets) of the superformula are as follows: ten super-time-crotchets for part I, *Montag*; seven for part II, *Dienstag*; five for part III, *Mittwoch*; nine for part IV, *Donnerstag*; eight for part V, *Freitag*; nine for part VI, *Samstag*; twelve for the final part, *Sonntag*. Each of the super-time-crotchets is divided into smaller time-crotchets in the following equation: 60 (the number of super-time-crotchets in the whole superformula) divided by the number of super-time-crotchets for each part of the cycle. This allows the duration of each scene in the cycle to be specified exactly. It is also worth mentioning that a ‘chromatic tempo scale’ is applied to the whole cycle: 12 metronomic values from the slowest to the quickest with an accuracy of one decimal place. Another musical element governed by the superformula is the dynamic layer of the work, varying in accordance with the profiles of the characters in the successive parts of the cycle.

Variant two involves the use of the three formulas individually, as melodies constituting recognisable profiles of the three main protagonists, characterised by distinctive registers and intervals. Michael’s formula has a distinctly canti-

⁹ Jonathan Cott, *Stockhausen. Conversations with the Composer* (London, 1974), 165.

¹⁰ Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Towards a cosmic music*, selected and trans. Tim Nevill (Shaftesbury, 1989), 84.

¹¹ Michael Kurtz, *Stockhausen, Eine Biographie* (Kassel, 1988), 276–279.

lena character and adheres to a high register, mostly the two-line octave. It is characterised by a sequence of distinctive melodic motifs, most often leaps of a fourth or fifth, reinforced by echo effects. Eve's formula employs the middle register – principally the one-line and small octaves. Besides rapid stepwise passages, similar to those in Michael's melody, it is dominated by intervals of a third and a sixth. The chief elements of this formula are timbre and colour, anticipated by arabesque and ornamental melodic motifs, regular and irregular glissandos and various kinds of sounds and noises, including yodelling, kissing, breathing and tongue clicking. Lucifer's formula is a set of notes in the lowest register (small and great octaves). The demon's melody is the least harmonious, dominated by quick, short motifs, repetitions, and the intervals of a seventh and tritone. The irregular rhythm and its short values enhance the agitated, often aggressive, character of Lucifer's part.

Variant three consists of the simplest structures, 'nodal' notes (thirteen from Michael's melody, twelve from Eve's melody, eleven from Lucifer's melody), derived from the melodies of the formulas, which form short motivic cells, characteristic of the particular days of the week (defined by Stockhausen with the scientific name *nukleus*).

Absorbing the composer for over one-third of his active creative life, the stage cycle *Licht* clearly has the character of a synthesis. It constitutes an exposition not only of Stockhausen's musical language, but of his individual compositional idiom, which can be reduced to a few essential features.

1. Stockhausen employs a wealth of vocal and instrumental forces, often reaching beyond the conventional European range of instruments. Alongside traditional methods of producing tones, he also uses other acoustic sounds, effects referring to religious practices of meditation and charming from many exotic parts of the world, onomatopoeic sounds and also noises of various kinds. It is these dialects – as the composer calls them¹² – that help determine the differences in communication of various linguistic and cultural groups. Integrating all these sound sources in *Licht*, Stockhausen juxtaposes notes of definite and indefinite pitch, vibratos, glissandos, cries, yodelling, whispers, kisses, clicks, etc. He treats voices and instruments in an individual way, not infrequently blurring the differences between their sound. He highlights the speech-like qualities of instrumental sounds, transposing dialects into instrumental articulation, and the instrument-like qualities of vocal sounds, relinquishing the semantic aspect of a text and instead exploiting its acoustic qualities. He uses voices and instruments such as the soprano, tenor and bass, trumpet, flute, basset horn and trombone, in a meaningful or symbolical function.

¹² Stockhausen, *Towards a cosmic music*, 84.

2. Stockhausen most often combines the traditional timbres of 'living' instruments with modern, electronic timbres, thereby achieving a completely new tonal palette. He experiments not only with tonal qualities, but also with their spatial distribution.

3. Composer enhances the audio-visual layer with a strict system of gestures and scenic movements.

4. Stockhausen provokes observers into redefining such notions as melody, harmony, timbre and polyphony and introducing the notion of 'polychrony', defining a new phenomenon in music – the simultaneous occurrence of at least two different tempos. The composer focuses most on the specific qualities of individual tones, their measuring, timbre, dynamic and functioning in space.

The question arises as to the generic affiliation of Stockhausen's *opus magnum*: close to operatic works by Luciano Berio and Mauricio Kagel or to pop productions of works by Philip Glass? Analysing the subject matter and content of *Licht*, as well as its message and the means of expression employed, it is difficult not to discern the unification, within a single work, of what might appear to be contrasting musical genres and kinds of theatre (mystery play, expressionist drama, happening). It is worth remembering that the composer himself does not employ any specific generic term except for *Opernzyklus*. He often, however, refers to the forms and genres of theatre, cultivated in many different parts of the world, which have inspired him (e.g. in Malaysia, Japan, Bali, the USA), and he admits to the evolution of his views on faith. It would seem, therefore, that Stockhausen sees his work in a broader context, beyond all existing generic definitions, as an attempt to combine the distant traditions of West and East, both in the subjects he takes up and the formal solutions he employs in the theatre. From this point of view, traditional methods of classifying examples of contemporary operatic works are ineffective. Perhaps the key to resolving the problem of genre or type in Stockhausen's music theatre will be a comparison with spectacles of the so-called Second Theatrical Reform, as Kazimierz Braun calls the avant-garde productions of Jerzy Grotowski, *The Living Theatre* or Peter Brook, classifying them as intercultural theatre, *theatrum mundi* or 'total theatre'.¹³

Finally, Stockhausen's work is not just an example of the transferral of contemporary theatrical solutions into the musical domain, but also – perhaps above all – an exposition of the composer's worldview, which was shaped under the influence of a great variety of events, encounters and texts.

¹³ See Kazimierz Braun, 'Druga Reforma Teatru' [The second reform of theatre], in *Kieszonkowa historia teatru polskiego* [A pocket history of Polish theatre] (Lublin, 2003), 215–228.

Can the substance of *Licht* be reduced to a common denominator? Can the heptalogy be called 'sacred' theatre? Or – on the contrary – an extremely profane, 'pagan' avant-garde spectacle? In 1953, Reinhold Schneider deemed all drama sacred, as it presents man's fate, and so the mystery implicit in God.¹⁴ Of a similar mind was Henri Gouhier, who saw the goal of all theatre in the creation of a new reality, and so in repeating the creative gesture of God.¹⁵ These theses led to the uncovering of the sacred aspects of plays by such writers as Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco, where the notion of *sacrum* was understood very broadly. In the opinion of the German theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, meanwhile, sacred theatre should endeavour to show the sense and purpose of existence, to pose questions of fundamental importance for human existence, about the meaning of existence and the purpose of suffering and death, and it should do so through the use of available, contemporary means.¹⁶ And these means – as Irena Sławińska writes – are 'a return to source', a journey back, a penetration of the rituals of exotic peoples, on one hand, and of the early liturgical theatre of the European Middle Ages, on the other.¹⁷ All of these conceptions place man at the centre and emphasise the existential character of theatre – of both historically understood sacred theatre and of contemporary concepts of the realisation of a spectacle. Continuing his idea about the essence of theatre, von Balthasar stressed the Romantic dialogue of creature with Creator, full of betrayal, flight, revolt and questions concerning the mystery of evil. This essence of theatre may constitute equally well the essence of human existence. Theatre is the projection of human existence onto the stage, which man has prepared for himself, as Sławińska relates after von Balthasar.¹⁸

Stockhausen the composer wrote a work about an arch-composer hero; his life penetrated the plot of the work, which expresses his fascination with the religion, culture and philosophy of the whole world, displaying his acquired art of creation. So it may be defined with von Balthasar's term *Das Welt-theater* (theatre of the world), which foregrounds the problem of the life of the artist as a received role played out on the stage of a theatre directed by the Great Director.

Translated by John Comber

¹⁴ See Reinhold Schneider, 'Theologie des Dramas', in *Dichter und Dichtung* (Cologne, 1953).

¹⁵ See Henri Gouhier, *Le théâtre et l'existence* (Paris, 1952).

¹⁶ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik*, 3 vols (Einsiedeln, 1973).

¹⁷ See Irena Sławińska, 'Dramat i teatr w refleksji teologicznej' [The play and theatre in theological reflection], in *Dramat i teatr sakralny* [The sacred play and theatre] (Lublin, 1988), 14.

¹⁸ Cit. after *ibid.*, 21.

