

Divine Comedy

Stockhausen's "Mittwoch" in Birmingham

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A version of this paper was first published in Tempo January 2013.

Abstract: Childhood play, leadership, suspense, thoughts of mediation and conciliation, Hamlet-like reflections on being and not-being, of facing and conquering fears, and of a hunger for stability and security in personal relationships, together with a full panoply of riffs on the colour yellow in European popular culture—many of them frankly unpleasant—are among the challenging ingredients of Stockhausen's *Mittwoch aus LICHT*, the last segment of the seven-opera *LICHT* jigsaw to be put in place. Stockhausen's operas are intricate literary puzzles or charades, every detail of which can be assigned a number of coded meanings. Despite bravura performances by an exceptional team of musicians, Graham Vick skated over much of the composer's uneasy symbolism in a brusque and simplistic *arte povera* production which, along with a battery of unsolved sound projection issues inherent in the score, placed altogether too much emphasis on the composer's dark side.

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HAMLET: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

POLONIUS: By th' mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.

HAMLET: Methinks it is like a weasel.

POLONIUS: It is backed like a weasel.

HAMLET: Or like a whale?

POLONIUS: Very like a whale.

Prince Hamlet jokes at the expense of his friend and mentor Polonius. To a modern audience, Polonius is a figure of fun, a pompous academic. But to an Elizabethan audience his name is an obvious reference to a native of Poland, in particular the astronomer Copernicus, whose cautious, pedantic studies of the heavens threatened to unseat the safe and secure world order of medieval astrology.

Responding to a request from the editor of Stockhausen's new website, in 1998 I submitted a 'Stockhausen Discussion Page' amounting to a loose collection of Frequently Asked Questions. The first question was 'Does Stockhausen really come from a planet of Sirius?' along with the answer, 'No, it's a German joke'. It was the composer's way of saying he wanted to be taken *seriously*. I had in mind a friendly quip, not to insult but to break the ice. The composer took umbrage, and I was banished to a remote corner of the Jim Stonebraker cosmos where the correspondence continues to languish. At the time I was at a loss to see why so great a stickler for devious wordplay, and expert in the art of weaving fantastical puzzles, should feign not to get the point.

Now the big issue is *Mittwoch aus LICHT*, and a new generation of listeners is beginning to wonder if the composer is really *really* serious, or if it is all a big, cosmic joke. In any other circumstance I would say, read the 'Stockhausen Discussion Page', I have nothing to add. Except for that bit about 'the German joke'. To an English reader, a *German* joke is a complicated philosophical puzzle expressed in code and alluding to an important truth, using wordplay as a rhetorical ploy to disarm one's opponent and seize the initiative. A German joke does not have to be funny: its purpose is to gain ascendancy and win the argument, by whatever means, including ridiculing one's opponent.

Historically the joke, or *Joque*, is a form of encrypted Buddhist teaching, adopted from the Sanskrit, translated in India and published in England by scholars and philologists Nathaniel Brassey Halhed and Sir William Jones, with particular reference to Halhed's edition from the Persian of the Hindu *Code of Gentoo Laws* published in 1776. A deliberately hermetic form of expression, it was taken up by the new romantics, along with the riddle and the caricature, as ammunition for an anti-Enlightenment culture of artists, poets, philosophers, and rhetoricians fearful of change and anxious to defend the language and privileges of rank and class—'the natural order'—against the threat of public education and imminent social revolution. The most celebrated exponent of the classic 'Joque' in recent times has been John Cage.¹

Since the composer's death in 2007, Stockhausen has increasingly emerged, not as a modernist, but as an unreconstructed eighteenth-century reactionary. The testimony of *LICHT* asks and deserves to be appreciated, decoded, and meticulously unpicked as a monster treatise on human nature, civilization, and German national aspirations, in the spirit and tradition of Schopenhauer and Goethe. Clues abound. The intimidating musically animated face of 'Lucifer's Dance' in *Samstag aus LICHT* is a study in caricature in the

terms of Johann Kaspar Lavater and William Hogarth, interpreting distortions of facial composure as signs of deformity of character. In *Hymnen*, created in 1966–67 at a time of student unrest, enmities are revived toward empiricist England, the old foe, making the British Crown target of a tongue-in-cheek canticle on names of the imperial colour red, a mischievous wordplay improvised by the composer and studio associates under the jovial rubric of ‘Windsor and Newton’. Exotic cultures visited by a trumpet-wielding Michael in his ‘Journey round the world’ in *Donnerstag aus LICHT* are rendered in parody as naked colonial stereotypes of pre-European and primitive races and peoples. Hierarchical vision, visceral rejection of evolution, and lofty disdain toward racial miscegenation (a metaphor for electronic intermodulation as well as interspecies and intergenerational union) are blatantly on show in *Freitag aus LICHT*. The reactionary messages are so many and so obvious one cannot help but be fascinated and at the same time embarrassed at the composer’s assertion so late in the day of so anachronistic a world view. Compared to the benign presence of Cage, his nearest rival in holistic consciousness, Stockhausen comes across as sardonic, autocratic, brutal, driven, and unrelenting in pursuit of an antiquated fantasy of a cosmic order governed by an intellectual elite.

A string quartet flying aloft in separate helicopters, soloists auditioning in chairs rising and descending over an unseen jury, and a dancing camel that excretes translucent globes in seven colours representing the seven planets of astrology, are only three among a plethora of arresting ingredients of ‘Wednesday from LIGHT’, the final piece of the seven-day puzzle of operatic pageants to be premiered in full, in Birmingham, as part of the British Cultural Olympics, coincidentally on 24th August, the composer’s 84th anniversary, a number auspicious in its own right as the product of seven (planets, days of the week, etc.) multiplied by twelve (notes in the chromatic scale, hours of daylight, months in the year, and so on). Experts and oracles from near and far, myself included, travelled across the globe to a rundown former chemical works in a Birmingham suburb: first to pray (or rather, to conference), then staying on to witness the first complete production of Stockhausen’s arguably bleakest mystery.

Days earlier, in a shiny new stadium in east London, an audience of sixty thousand, and viewing public numbering in the millions, had witnessed a 27 million pound Olympic opening ceremony, a nationalistic pageant featuring helicopters, skydiving royalty, movie icons, special effects projections depicting the British industrial revolution, orbiting cyclists rising into the air in an unearthly ultraviolet glow, and other marvels, all delivered to the

accompaniment of happily jingoistic and worker-friendly but pretty ordinary music by a roundup of national talent including Sir Paul McCartney and the Sex Pistols. In a segment depicting the greening of rural England a Stockhausen fan might have recognized a crib by director Danny Boyle of a magic moment from the production of Stockhausen's *Montag aus LICHT*, one where the goddess of fruitfulness is transformed in the twinkling of an eye from a giant female sculpture between whose legs small children and other animals come and go, into a small green mountain covered with trees—a punning tribute, in the language of music, to the composer Monteverdi. Such celebrations, a cross between Chinese opera and Cirque du Soleil, are very different from opera as we normally understand it. Both London and Birmingham events attach to a tradition of philosophical entertainment related to the English masque or Florentine *intermedio*, showcases of artistic and mechanical skill designed to reinforce the authority of an educated elite while pandering to the lower orders' appetite for displays of magic and mythology.

Born of fanciful millennial despair, conceived in emulation of the Egyptian hieroglyphs, coded messages from the dawn of civilization finally decrypted in Napoleonic times; announced in 1977, the year Voyager I departed on its celestial journey carrying Carl Sagan's inscribed message of peace and love to civilizations beyond the solar system; and sharing vaguely the same apocalyptic vision as George Lucas's seven-part *Star Wars* movie series, itself launched in 1977, Stockhausen's seven-day opera cycle *LICHT* amounts to a monumental time capsule and testament of life on earth, designed to survive a perceived threat of imminent nuclear annihilation, and be exhumed and decrypted by a hopefully advanced but otherwise unknown race of survivors thousands of years hence. A message conceived at the same time and place and in the same terms as Anselm Kiefer's imposing giant book creations, with pages of lead sheets, also intended to withstand the effects of ionizing radiation and preserve images of German landscape and culture as objects of wonder for the appreciation of inquisitive life-forms in the remote future.

There were appreciative reviews after the premiere of *Mittwoch*, among them Peter Quantrell in *The Gramophone*, and Mark Swed in the *LA Times*, indications of a new and welcome stirring of interest, fascination, perhaps a will to listen, even an inclination to suffer a little for art. So far, so good. Read and rejoice. What reviews don't do is tell the reader what is actually going on. They don't explain. Do not e-l-u-c-i-d-a-t-e. Rupert Christiansen, in *The Daily Telegraph*: 'High praise is due to the director Graham Vick and his colleagues who have devised a flamboyantly imaginative and rigorously executed staging in a disused

warehouse'. *Rigorously executed*. How does he know? 'A triumph of logistics' opined Andrew Clements in *The Guardian* (23 August): this of a production providing no exit lights, and comfort services reduced to a squalid dump of plastic portable toilets standing in a makeshift foyer in pitch black darkness. *A triumph of logistics?* How could he tell? As late as 8 August director Graham Vick was quoted, also in the *Guardian*, as saying 'There are no rights and wrongs and absolutes. It's up to you to decide whether the experience was good or not'. That can only mean one of two things. Either the director doesn't know, or he ain't saying. I suspect the latter, and rest my case. Or perhaps he is asking the reader to believe that not knowing, just coming away with a woozy feeling of having taken part in something rather grand, is sufficient, will do, is good enough.

It is not good enough. Not good enough because while individual and group performances were brave and praiseworthy, and rose to the occasion as well as could be expected from the challenge of the composer's brilliantly subversive notations, in too many significant respects the *production* did not, probably could not, succeed. For a director to say that it is up to the individual to decide what to take away from the performance is simply evading the question of what a production of *Mittwoch* that is truly faithful to Stockhausen's aesthetic and technical requirements ought to resemble, and how to read it. That Vick's production fell short may be blamed on lack of time, an inadequate performing space with inappropriate acoustics, or on the ground that he didn't know, or because his hands were tied. For me the production failed overwhelmingly because it was careless of, or unfaithful to, the composer's intentions. Essential technical competencies demanded by the score, most notably in 'Orchester-Finalisten' and 'Michaelion', were simply not addressed.

As a guest at Stockhausen's home in Kürten, east of Cologne, I was more than once invited to sit at table on a child's low, rustic, three-legged wooden 'naughty stool' fashioned from crooked branches, an unsubtle reminder that the visitor was in the presence of greatness. In 2012, after forty hours of continuous travel, most of the time squeezed into a concertina of barely upholstered economy seats patrolled by food police, the prospect of five hours plus comfort breaks of *Mittwoch aus LICHT* ought to have been a breeze. I was not counting on five hours of darkness, bleak surroundings, of being forced to sit on infant camp stools, or lie on poolside mattresses splashed by water, or bare sheets of industrial foam rubber laid on unyielding concrete floors in factory spaces which, while sealed from intrusive daylight, were evidently not immune to the occasional rainshower. The level of inflicted discomfort was so pronounced, especially for older pilgrims such as myself, as to

give the impression of deliberately contrived humiliations and not just the unfortunate side-effects of a low-budget production in fashionable *arte povera* style. Recall that in times past, in the composer's impressionable youth, similar tactics of discomfort and disorientation had been scientifically applied at mass rally events in order to soften up an impressionable laity. Fear, discomfort, apprehension, and danger, familiar ingredients of Stockhausen's dramaturgy, were inflicted if anything more rigorously on players required to perform in high chairs, suspended in swings high in mid-air, or jammed in the back seat of a helicopter, and other ludicrous stuff, in a scenario signalling an ironic and ominous return by the master of *LIGHT* to the idea of enveloping darkness as a precondition for spiritual illumination, abandoning the colorful visual fantasy of earlier operas to reawaken memories of covert wartime radiophonics and associated fears of imminent death.

As the name suggests, *Mitt-woch* ('mid-week') is about middle-ness (and possibly weak-ness) in all its permutations: media, in particular radio; air as a medium for speech and music, also for flight and escape, and cosmic space as the final frontier. Another meaning of midness is compromise, translation, agreement; finding common ground or the middle way—and at the highest level, of love, the love celebrated in the cantata *Momente* as a species of telepathic intuition, beyond the need for words. Yet another meaning is 'communication with the divine', about pursuing a vision without question, and of training a musician to become a divine messenger or transmitter of intelligence from afar (like Mercury, god of Wednesday and the cellphone). The technological implications are punningly conveyed in 'Midi': the use of electronics to transmute instruments into voices and *vice versa*, after the manner of *Kontakte* and *Gesang der Jünglinge*. One is made uncomfortably aware that for Stockhausen, the arts of compromise and mutual agreement are not altogether admirable, or even desirable. The most obvious sign that things are not right is the absence, in all but melody, of key characters Michael, Eva, and Luzifer. Since they represent extreme terms, or unalloyed manifestations of a triple human nature, perhaps it makes logical sense for them to be out of view, but one suspects their absence to carry a more sinister message of opposition to middleness in all of its manifestations. That would imply that compromise and agreement are actually expressions of weakness, conciliation an offence against the natural order, a challenge to leadership, and denial of hierarchy, all aspects of mediation tending irrevocably to chaos and anarchy—in short, *mediocrity*, the hidden message of 'Welt-Parlament'.

The colour of middleness is thus 'medi-ochre'. Wednesday's colour yellow is the pigment of egg, sulphur and lead oxide, the colour of a camel, and also the colour and smell

of fear, cowardice, urine, gall, and dung. At the end of the show audience and players, one and all, were cordially invited to take ‘a cup of yellow’ (processed orange juice from a carton, served in a plastic glass). Tacky. Excretion, said Freud, is a child’s first consciously creative act. Spontaneous evacuation of the bladder and bowels is also a natural response of an adult in panic or facing imminent death, depicted by Salvador Dalí in the painting “*Le jeu lugubre*” (1929). On the floor underneath the hangman’s noose, below the trapdoor, sits a chamber pot. Behind the innocent mask of compromise is a darker *geist*, Odin or Wodin, Wednesday’s other name, associated with conflict, desire for victory, and death. For a day associated with Mercury, one expects to see red, the colour of mercuric oxide. And indeed, red is subtly in evidence, in the dress both of the new female president of ‘Welt-Parlament’ and of the lead violinist, perched on a swing, of ‘Orchester-Finalisten’. In the official scheme, red is the colour assigned to Mars, the god of war, whose day is *Dienstag*, Tuesday, the day of service. The inter-textual connection of yellow and red, bile and blood, construing mediation as preparation for war, is given in ‘Michaelion’ in a brief but telling permutation of the name KA-MEL to KA-KA-BEL, the fallen angel of cabbalistic lore tasked with protecting and advising archangel Michael, with preparation for battle, and dressed in red, the colour of war.

To begin at the beginning. ‘Wednesday Greeting’ is about absence. For almost an hour an audience consisting largely of over-forties adults was forced to perch uneasily in virtual darkness on kindergarten camp stools as if caged and scrutinized by unseen aliens. The electronic music, a remix of the ‘outer space’ music of Scene 4, ‘Michaelion’, a pathetic echo of *Gesang der Jünglinge* emulating the more up to date burning in Hell aesthetic popularized by the Norwegian death metal band Burzum and dedicated to the God of Darkness. What we were given to experience at the very outset, in a kind of Möbius strip inversion of narrative causality, was a foretaste of the utter desolation and abandonment to be attained at the dénouement of Scene 4: the composer in effect saying ‘My end is my beginning’. A longwinded accompanying programme note, identical with the compact disc text, contrived to give away nothing at all of any use to the reader, only a comic strip sequence of arrow diagrams airily purporting to show how unidentified taped sounds programmed by graphics tablet attached to a *Fairlight* (!) synthesizer were supposed to float off the walls and into the audience space, hover in mid-air as if by remote control, or circulate back and forth like ghostly dancers in a courtly masque. From time to time, nondescript characters crouching among the audience, dressed in black castoffs spattered in

yellow as if shat upon from a great height, were cued into standing and waving silently like stoned fans at a Pink Floyd concert from the early seventies. Worst of all, *the sounds did not move*. Around and along the walls, perhaps, but into the arena, most certainly not, suggesting either that the otherwise admirable sound system was not set up as required, or that the master tape is in dire need of a remix. At one point in the tape a high-pitched female voice—Kathinka Pasveer—is heard singing ‘Me-me-me-me!’—in a melancholy echo of the profoundly joyful scene in *Momente* where the solo soprano is asked to *build* a positive relationship with choir and audience by improvising a story from real life around the words ‘Me-me-me-me!’ and ‘Nein-nein-nein-nein’.²

The playschool indignities continued in Scene 1, ‘Welt-Parlament’, for which the audience was required to sit or lie on narrow foam plastic sheets while a bevy of adult singers, perching on high yellow umpire’s stools, their faces garishly painted in the colours of different countries, joined in singing *a cappella*, mostly it appeared at the tops of their voices, purportedly on the subject of love. (The yellow chairs, some with seven rungs, others with nine or more, might conceivably have been organized in some sort of serial order, but appeared to be randomly distributed from a catalogue.)³ What could be more natural for the composer of *Momente*—one of the most moving of twentieth-century paeans to love—than to have a choir sing about love? What could be more natural than a choir representing an assembly of world cultures to be singing a hymn to world peace, the collective expression of love? And yet, could anything more patently *ludicrous* be imagined than the idea of an unaccompanied assembly even attempting to rationalize, let alone legislate, human relations in a procedure reduced to a succession of barking statements ricocheting from side to side: ‘Love is this’, ‘Love is that’, adjudicated by a conciliatory but clearly ineffectual, gavel-wielding, male President. Half way through this Parliament of Fowls (or Foulis, or Ship of Fools, after Hieronymus Bosch), a hubbub at times sounding more like the House of Parrots at Regent’s Park Zoo, the President is abruptly summoned from his seat of office by a Higher Power, a parking warden, literally a *deus ex machina* threatening to tow away his illegally parked car, in a blatant steal from Woody Allen’s 1966 dub movie *What’s up, Tiger Lily?* (On disc, the vehicle is identified as ‘MEV Mittwoch 1996’, a witticism aimed at free improvisation, specifically the defunct collective *Musica Elettronica Viva*.)

In the President’s absence (cue return of the theme of absence), the cry goes up ‘We need a new leader’ (cue the ‘need for leadership’ theme). Upon which, without ceremony, purely by acclamation, a woman in scarlet, a coloratura soprano, descends one ladder and

ascends another to assume the chairmanship, singing with such brilliance and eloquence that members of the choir, male and female alike, are visibly and uncomfortably aroused. The whole scene can be read as a ghastly parody of the silent mimes of *Inori*. A redeeming feature (other than the bravura, perfect-pitch singing itself) is the irruption of a male voice barbershop quartet, singing all together in the wartime style of The Andrews Sisters, to the significant words ‘Love resounds in your voice’ (i.e., not in the words you are saying, but in the very timbre of your voice), a pledge politely received by female members with small simulated sighs of ecstasy.

The replacement by *force majeure* of a male leader by a female authority figure in red can be construed in a number of ways, not least in relation to the composer and his succession. More to the point, the attainment of agreement is in every sense a non-event, since it leads only to confusion and anarchy. Having decided to agree, the choir shuts shop, ups and leaves. In the score, each member *ought* to have carried a ticking digital metronome set to a different tempo, creating a delicate halo of Ligeti-like noise to accompany the choir’s entrance and exit. Alas, there were no metronomes, nor any mention of metronomes in the programme book. As the choir wended out, leaning down to shake hands with members of a largely supine audience, a straggling bass, clearly a simpleton, stuttered ‘And n-n-now, here c-c-comes the n-n-next s-s-scene’—in yet another exquisitely crafted moment of pure embarrassment. (Singing is a cure for stuttering, which may be the composer’s underlying point; all the same, I would have preferred a ‘Ma-ma-ma-Max Headroom’ impression after the sci-fi comedy tv series from the 1980s: less real, but a lot funnier.)⁴

Making ingratiating noises high up in the air is also the cue for ‘Orchester-Finalisten’ (Orchestra Finalists), adding a new motif to the ‘chairperson’ and ‘leadership’ themes: ‘a need for the approval of one’s peers and superiors’. I have drawn attention in the past to the fact that the players do not constitute an orchestra collective in the usual sense, since on the rare occasions that they play together—unlike *Stimmung*, for example, or *Momente*—there is no procedure in place to create harmony; also to the political subtext of such a title, from the fact that *finalism* is strictly ‘an anti-progressivist, metaphysical belief in final causes whereby natural processes or events are determined by the way things are and have always been, by design of a divine Providence, in opposition to a belief in mechanical determination or historical (or evolutionary) determinism’. In other words, pure Schopenhauer.⁵

Stockhausen envisages the soloists as competition finalists notwithstanding, hovering in space like angels over tape panoramas of environmental sounds: in this case,

largely *happy* memories of childhood, of travel abroad, and of his year as a junior apprentice in Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète* studios. We seem also to be revisiting *Hymnen*, the tape composition evoking in radiophonic terms the sounds of urban civilization monitored by overflying aircraft. Here however the flying is for real. The scene begins with an oboe solo that sounds like a scream of terror.⁶

Trials and auditions are real and necessary in the world of music as much as in a master chef television series, but this episode was less about quality (other than audience appreciation of the singular prowess and bravery of the performers, all of whom deserve medals) than about calculated humiliation under the gaze of an unseen and dematerialized jury. 'Orchester-Finalisten' is inversely symmetrical to *Der Jahreslauf*, the work of mock *gagaku* theatre, now Act I of *Dienstag*, in which the players are offered various inducements to *stop* playing, and in doing so, to stop time, and by inference bring Japanese industry to a standstill—temptations coincidentally associated with Lucifer.⁷ The theme of audition also resonates with the Examination scene in *Donnerstag aus LICHT*, in its turn a surreptitious allusion to the Chinese tradition of examining every candidate for civic office, hence exemplifying the futility of auditioning rank and file musicians, those destined never to make it as soloists. A popular and widespread view, by the way, also addressed in Stravinsky's *The Nightingale* after Hans Andersen's fairy tale.⁸

Here was an opportunity for Graham Vick to show a little invention, perhaps by projecting movie images of children playing, ships, marshalling yards etc. on translucent screens against which the players could be seen silhouetted. Instead he opted to materialize a few of them full in the audience space, imitating the sounds of swimming with the aid of a cheap inflatable plastic pool full of water, wheeled across the floor at head height, in which a trombonist splashed and cavorted, while others listlessly threw darts, and prop actors wearing glazed expressions, one with a plastic airplane affixed to his head, paraded like zombies in and out among a bemused audience reclining on scruffy poolside mattresses. A bassist, playing pizzicato and thus by inference a jazz musician, showing signs either of panic or excess social medication, went through cruelly prolonged agonies of losing the plot, in defiance of the reality that bass players are normally among the most stable members of any band. His unseemly—and *poorly-executed*—caricature of mental breakdown might just have referred to the stressed-out solo string players feigning madness in the 1971 composition *Trans* (alternate title: *Jenseits* 'after death') but on balance it seemed to me to relate more convincingly to an episode of bizarre behaviour by an intoxicated female

nightclub singer witnessed by the composer at a Count Basie concert in New York in 1958.⁹ High in the air, a flutist (sitting in for the aforementioned Kathinka) fluffed her lines and squealed: ‘I’m so-o-o sorry!’—the only one of the group to speak. Back on the ground, in a tiny, charming vignette, a pair of elderly gents with mutton-chop whiskers marched calmly up and down the aisles, smoke billowing out of their top hats, in a nicely local allusion to the great British industrialist Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

Hovering is a problem. In *Donnerstag*, Michael and his trumpet fly about in an industrial cherry-picker cloaked in clouds of dry ice. Here, individual players were strapped into metal chairs, able to rise or descend vertically, but unable to swing or rotate, perhaps for safety reasons. The players imitate the sounds on tape, which is normal for Stockhausen, the difference being that they are literally hovering in mid-air, their task being to interpret concrete sounds from nature, many of them small in scale, as discarded fragments of the Michael, Eva, and Luzifer formulae, to be compiled into a *Merzbild* after Kurt Schwitters.

To Stockhausen’s way of thinking, the test of true musicianship is imitation of nature (so it is a little weird of Timothy Ball, quoted on the Rambler blogsite, to object to my characterization of the players imitating insect life as ‘sinister’). The imitation game has to do with *language*: how we identify things, *communication*: how we agree on what we are talking about, and *memory*: how we remember, or are remembered. For Stockhausen, a student of information theory in the 1950s, imitation is forever linked with Alan Turing, decrypter and author of the Imitation Game (his centenary, along with Cage’s, was celebrated in 2012), and in philosophy with Plato’s account of the death of Socrates, in particular the famous Argument from Likeness on the immortality of the soul, advanced by the condemned philosopher just before taking hemlock (a cup of green). Plato is the source of Stockhausen’s aphorism ‘Liking is remembering’: an article of belief grounded I have no doubt in the mystery of the unison, and for twentieth-century musicians, in the miracle of music notation which allows a person to reenter and experience a person’s mind and thoughts after that person has long departed.¹⁰

Stockhausen’s insistence on having the players literally suspended in chairs could just as easily be construed as frustrated revenge at not being able to have the sounds of music appear to hover and dance in mid-air by themselves. A precedent for musical instruments appearing to fly round the heads of an audience was set back in 1940, in the Disney movie *Fantasia*, a soundtrack recorded by Stokowski on optical film and still to be had on dvd. Disney’s choreography of moving instruments was achieved by an early form of

programmed sound projection. No players were harmed in the making of this soundtrack. None was threatened with being swung around on a chair at the end of a rope. In his 1971 lecture 'Four Criteria of Electronic Music', a segment from the Robert Slotover film inserted into the Barrie Gavin BBC documentary *Tuning In* (1980), now available on YouTube, Stockhausen recalls asking as early as 1953 if it would be possible to put musicians in chairs, and swing them round about. I can only surmise that he had heard of the rotating sounds of *Fantasia*, or seen the movie for himself, and wanted to recreate the effect. In the Osaka *Expo '70* geodesic dome, solo players were able to stand or promenade along a circular gallery above and around the audience, allowing the composer to spin their voices up and down and in any direction from a control desk with the aid of a whirligig. Enabling sounds to hover in space is a recognized technical and acoustical issue, not a logistical challenge. Putting players in swings is all of a piece with the failure of electronic sounds in 'Mittwochs-Grüss' to float free, even in four-channel space. The irony is that Stockhausen has already achieved it, in 1991, with the marvellously rotating, coruscating, meowing globe of sound suspended in mid-air at the end of the music to *Octophonie*.

From the very beginning I have recognized 'Helicopter String Quartet' as a work of genius. In this scene, members of a string quartet squeeze into separate helicopters, the cellist actually sitting on the floor, fly aloft, and return. I have already written at length about the work in *Other Planets*, and more recently, in *Avant Garde* (Scarecrow Press, 2012), not to mention at least three separate articles on the James Stonebraker website. Among a few new ideas from a paper delivered at the Birmingham Festival of Light Conference of 2012 are a suggestion that the work may have been partially inspired by the Prelude to *Requiem Canticles* by Stravinsky, dating from 1966, on the ground that the earlier miniature is also about a quartet of solo strings making earnest conversation while borne aloft by a *ripieno* of pulsating strings, then brought back to earth with a bump, in all of a minute and twenty-three seconds. More to the point, I loved the performances, which injected a note of altogether wholesome realism to the composer's recurrent themes of appearance and disappearance, of flying and separating, of staying in touch, keeping the faith, and returning safely to the here and now. It was only after actually witnessing the performance, including the introductions and subsequent question and answer sessions, all executed with great good humour and without any hint of dissembling, that one could begin to shake off the clumsiness, the cynicism, and the strident bad taste of so much that had gone before. These were professionals: musicians, pilots, cameramen and sound engineers, doing their duty and doing

their best. And they did so *by leaving the room*.

To understand why I think the quartet is such a *good* piece (I mean ‘good’ in a moral sense, not only good-entertaining and good-exciting, like a high-wire act), it helps to have a sense of Stockhausen’s ongoing problems with technical issues, his history of making sounds move in space, of transforming one sound into another by imitation or intermodulation, of synchronizing and harmonizing voices live and on tape, or when vastly separated in space and time. His attention to the poetry of the microphone began with exposure as a schoolboy to tape recorded propaganda with sound effects of air strikes in wartime, fascination with the poetry of illusion leading him to acquire and master an entirely new vocabulary of special effects and skills over a decade as apprentice to Herbert Eimert at Cologne Radio in experimental studio facilities administered by Radio Drama. As a WDR inhouse composer, his radiophonic compositions were invariably subject to quality control, and gained enormously in prestige from the collective input of an expert technical workforce, along with the mentoring presence and encouragement of Eimert and information scientist Werner Meyer-Eppler.

In 1964 Stockhausen began experimenting in recording and balance engineering on his own account, embarking on a pattern of risk-taking that would bring him in conflict with technical staff. There were successes: *Telemusik*, composed in Tokyo in 1966 with the help of a team of Japanese technicians at NHK, and *Mantra*, composed in 1970 for two pianos and a robust technical apparatus operated in real time. Elsewhere, he faced problems expressing his artistic vision in terms acceptable to highly trained audio engineers, for example relating to the acoustic goals of works such as *Mikrophonie I* and *Mixtur*, a loss of confidence having the effect of leading the composer along a path of increasing abstraction, and finally to his separation from publisher Universal Edition and record company DG. From around 1980 to the end of his life, Stockhausen would rely on younger assistants, including his son Simon, to interpret his wishes, expecting them to intuit the aesthetic goals of the age of tape, while at the same time adapting them to a new generation of digital synthesizers. The younger generation lacked the older studio engineers’ professional background and experience of classical recording in stereo or surround-sound, not having learned to recognize the subtle challenges of recording live instruments in spatially realistic and coherent terms. It would lead over the years to the same difficulties arising, time and again, from work to work, and to a few acquiring a life of their own as malign spirits in the composer’s private cosmology.

One such is intermodulation, the mutual interference of one instrument with another to create new, hybrid sounds. The process is explicit in works such as *Mixtur* and *Mikrophonie II*, and implicit in later works including *LICHT* employing instruments representing pure waveforms as defining characters: the flute as sine wave, clarinet/basset horn as square wave, and trumpet/trombone as ramp or sawtooth wave. These three waveforms are fundamental patches or circuits created by Friedrich Trautwein and Oskar Sala for the Trautonium, an early synthesizer dating from the 1930s. According to theory, any waveform, thus any desired timbre, could be recreated simply by combining these three basic waveforms in the appropriate weights; it should therefore be possible for living musicians, performing on acoustic instruments representing the same three waveforms, to ‘interact’ electronically or acoustically, and thereby open up an entire range of previously unimagined timbres, and modify and refine them endlessly.

So far, as of now, it has not happened. By the 1990s, it had not happened with so great a sense of finality that the composer was moved, in *Freitag aus LICHT*, openly to repudiate ring modulation as a mortal sin. Yet the waveforms survive, and the scores continued to be composed, not only in the expectation that intermodulation may one day be feasible, but implying ever greater degrees of complicated subtlety. In fact, it *should* be possible to realize Stockhausen’s vision, and bring those fabulous sounds into existence, and make them move in space. It just hasn’t happened yet.

Meantime, the problem is approached from a new direction by manhandling four players into small helicopters and transporting them bodily aloft. The notion of string players blending in with the sound of helicopter rotors can be dated back a century to Marinetti’s *Futurist Manifesto* of 1913. Stockhausen acknowledges his own experience of listening to the intermingling of four propellers on long-distance flights across America as a primary influence, not only on *Carré* for four orchestras (1959–60), but also *Stimmung* for voices (1968). The difference between four propellers interacting on a single aircraft and helicopter rotors on four separate helicopters interacting at a studio mixing desk, however, is that a Douglas DC-9 is a single vibrating structure through which the sounds of four propellers genuinely interact, whereas the rotors of four separate helicopters are unable to interact in quite the same way. All the same, the idea of string players playing along, and blending in with the rotor sounds to bring out a latent harmony, is striking and poetic. There is also a certain poetic justice in acknowledging the discipline required to make sounds under such conditions, even a type of sound appearing unduly harsh and monotonous, and even against

the nature of the instruments, in order to transform mechanical sound into music. It may take a generation or more to make it work, but it is possible, and it is a beautiful idea.

Before and after the performance, the members of the string quartet and pilots were introduced to the audience by a cast member called the Moderator, a role and title (*medio, modo, middleman*) reserved by the composer for himself, taken up in his absence by popular radio DJ Nihal, who I am bound to point out is of Anglo-Indian descent. The composer's presence as Moderator, real or implied, is significant. It is his only 'appearance' in person. It locates him at the opposite pole from the Operator in 'Michaelion'. A Moderator presents people and actions as they really are, an enabler assisting the audience to share in the reality of a concrete event in the here and now, in this case a ceremony of departure and return to transport performers and audience alike into a different sphere, while sharing the musicians' journey and reactions by means of images and signals transmitted by television and radio to ground control, to be followed intently by listeners on giant screens.

So why DJ Nihal, gung-ho optimist and cheeky chappie? Vick is tight-lipped. Nihal himself feigns not to know, and does it very well. Let me see.

Oh. A descendant of British and Indian stock, a fusion of empiricist and Sanskrit cultural heritages. Of caste and culture, red and yellow. Perfect. Suddenly the Chinese takeaway innocently stationed in the carpark outside is looking like a deliberate plant, just one more ingredient of a deeply unsavoury neo-Aryan script.¹¹

Before the show and during the first interval audience members have been free to mingle with a pair of benign and well-behaved Bactrian camels, a couple, male and female of the two-hump species, posing for photographs while quietly munching on custard creams (yellow again! *Will these hands ne'er be clean?*). The reality behind a dancing camel who defecates planets, seven orbs in the colours of the week, as the centrepiece of 'Michaelion'.

Radio host: So why *does* a camel excrete planets, Professor Jung?

A: Well, you know, to get *them* out of *his* system.

Q: Ha ha, very droll. And what do you think, Dr Freud?

A: I would put it this way. As we know, to eat is to ingest, and to excrete is to create, to express oneself. So to do both is 'to express oneself—but *in jest*'. In jest. It's a pun, you understand: *ingest, in jest*.

Q: And the planetary spheres?

A: Cosmic boules. You know, *boules*.

Q: Boulez?

A: Balls.

In the words of Los, demiurge of William Blake's *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Great Albion* (1820) 'I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another man's. I will not Reason & Compare; my business is to Create'. Stockhausen's inspirations are ultimately redeemed by an extraordinary richness and depth of allusion, by their internal consistency, and inflexible adherence to an underlying code of figures and actions that is serial in origin and stated in quite beautifully simple terms, however uncomfortable we may feel about some of them. In Raphael's *School of Athens* (1510–11) Zoroaster is depicted with a shining blue sphere poised on the fingertips of his right hand. This is the territory.

In 'Michaelion' a mythical Operator fields calls in a multitude of so-called alien tongues in the manner of a radio chat-show host located in deep space. The Operator is a persona devised by Stéphane Mallarmé to account for a new kind of verse ('Un coup de dés') capable of being assembled at will and in different ways by the individual reader 'at the throw of a die'. Mallarmé is the poet of Modernism: of Debussy, Ravel, and Boulez. Especially Boulez. In turn, the Operator is associated, not so much with Cage as with Henri Pousseur, or the Boulez of 'Sonate, que me veux-tu?'—the latter in relation to a species of indeterminacy encountered in the *Third Piano Sonata, Pli selon pli, Domaines*, and other mobile works composed in rearrangeable block formation, but lacking the formal and intellectual universality of Stockhausen's Moment theory. Under a slightly different hat, the Operator also appears in the writings of a Boulez associate, the ineffably boring culture and media philosopher Roland Barthes, author of *Image – Music – Text*.

Barthes is of interest in the present case because his is a kind of intellectualism that came to power in the 1950s. A civil servant by profession, he exemplifies a parasitic culture and bureaucracy of the mind which for generations has stifled the growth of intelligent appreciation of new music and ideas, including Stockhausen. This sort of thing:

'What takes place' in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally *nothing* (Mallarmé: 'A dramatic work displays the succession of exteriors of the act without any moment retaining reality and, in the end, [without] anything happening'—*Oeuvres complètes*, 296); 'what happens' is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its *coming*.¹²

(Er, okay.) So the jokey content of 'Michaelion' in some sense, is payback time for French-speaking intellectuals. Well-deserved, perhaps, and it explains—and may even forgive—much of the burning anger underpinning the relentless jokes, the posturing, the unending charade.

A powerful thread of the *Mittwoch* narrative involves the theme of appearance and disappearance, Hamlet's meditation of being and not being—a gradual displacement of the zone of communication from face to face actual people, in the here and now and on the ground, to disembodied voices increasingly separated in time and space: off the ground, up in the air, and preserved on tape, through to isolated voice transmissions echoing through space: '*Auch Engeln sind immer unterwegs*' as the composer's libretto strikingly puts it in *Donnerstag aus LICHT*: restless spirits doomed to wander for all eternity. Yet another progression implies the inexorable erosion of authentic human presence from the act of communication, starting from the unscripted natural speech of childhood play, moving to polite dialogue, gradually mutating to formal and impersonal speech (the parking warden), and on to singing in the style of The Andrews Sisters. The trend toward absence continues from the sound of real or recorded singing voices to the substitution for voices of speechless melody instruments performing in real time, in 'Orchester-Finalisten' blending in with features of the natural acoustic landscape, then in 'Helicopter String Quartet' reduced to the disembodied colorations of machine noises, to be reborn in 'Michaelion' as incarnate pure waveforms of flute, trumpet, trombone, and bass horn, and finally attenuated to disembodied traces of electronic music in 'Mittwochs-Abschied'. The relentless withdrawal of human contact from the humorous banter and professional discipline of 'Helicopter String Quartet' to 'Michaelion'—a spectre of emptiness and desolation blending *Star Wars* sci-fi with the bleak comedy of Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*—despite the fun and games, is epic in implication, and deserves an appropriate sensibility in production terms. In 'Michaelion' an Arthur Rackham styled mini-masque evokes an image of the Lord of the Dance as a dancing camel, played as a category error or misplaced anagram, just one of a great many poetic fictions of meaningful wordplay dating from the composer's information science studies of the arts of surrealism, and dada of Tristan Tzara, poetic conceits drawn from a magician's hat full of cut-up syllables.

Rotating sounds, along with sounds that blink on and off, appearing and disappearing, while comfortable to simulate around a ribbon microphone in a recording studio, pose particular technical challenges for audio engineers in a theatre production. Such tricks appear to particular effect in 'Michaelion' not only as familiar features of the composer's musical language, but because the composer's score clearly identifies them. Sample pages of notation clearly show the solo players engaged in a precisely imagined choreography of interrelated cycles, face to face and orbiting like planets in a cosmic dance

of attraction and occultation. Technical challenges implied by such a notation relate to sounds being clearly heard to circle in space, and combining to form new and unearthly, radiant tone qualities (after the fashion, dare I say, of Boulez's computer-generated tones in *Répons* and *Explosante-Fixe*). It is one thing for a musical director to ignore the implications of a notation in the context of critical theory, leaving the performer to execute instructions as though any problem will solve itself, which appears to be what we are dealing with here. It is quite another matter for the combined resources of Team Vick and Team Stockhausen not to recognize the challenge at all, choosing rather to disguise the climax of *Mittwoch* as a vaudeville comedy act, no longer as a 'modernist' or 'futurist', or indeed, 'timeless' work of musical theatre, but rather as a whimsical period piece in the spirit of Meliès, creator in 1902 of the pioneer stop-motion short *Journey to the Moon*. Especially odd, given the abundance of expertise freely available in Britain—not forgetting Birmingham University Music Department—to assist a production struggling to get by on a restricted budget.

'Michaelion' takes place in a region, not quite beyond time and space, but pretty close, perhaps Douglas Adams' or George Lucas's pub at the end of the Universe. Once again, in default of plot, responding to what seems to be a nervous tic, the narrative calls for an election. The whole of *Mittwoch* consists of matching pairs of actions, so this is presumably a reprise of 'Welt-Parlament', but without the structure of an actual assembly. One by one the tropes advance: 'need for a leader' (in other words, absence of a leader), 'election by acclamation' (rather than by debate or argument), and with the added gloss that only people of privilege, those with access to a cellphone, are able to vote. The votes are intercepted—'collated' is hardly the word—by the Operator, a person, according to Boulez, who acts as a *régisseur* without imposing his own preferences on the assembly. Again, paraphrasing Boulez, *citons Barthes*:

'with respect to this music one must put oneself in the position or, better, in the activity of an operator, who knows how to displace, assemble, combine, fit together; in a word (if it is not too worn out), who knows how to structure (very different from constructing or reconstructing in the classic sense).'¹³

The Operator, an isolated figure, a reputed master of language, takes in information from the ether and excretes it out for the benefit of an otherwise dispersed population of lost souls unable to communicate. Here he acts as a pollster, a key ingredient of the peacetime scene in postwar Europe and the United States, for many a radical political framework to succeed the demise of Hitler, a time in which a defeated Germany struggled with the idea of world

leadership being decided by secret ballot—or in their terms, by chance. Wielding an antique short-wave receiver from the 1960s, the Operator announces the election of a camel as president. You and I know right away that KAMEL is a comic permutation of MICHAEL, nevertheless a camel duly appears and does a dance at the end of which the sacred orbs are excreted and gathered up with muted hosannas by a convocation presumably of singing asteroids. A fight breaks out between the camel and the trombone player, a reprise of the Michael-Luzifer confrontation of *Donnerstag*. It ends when the skin of the camel splits like a chrysalis to reveal the Operator in person. It was him all along.

That the dancing camel turns out to be a hollow contrivance could conceivably identify it as a Trojan Horse in disguise, or a contrived parody of the mythological popularity contest, adjudicated by King ‘golden shower’ Midas, between Apollo and Marsyas. This (as of course you already know) was a contest between Apollo, representing the art of harmony, and Marsyas, the panpiping scientist. Apollo stands for perfect harmony achieved through constant attention to interval relations, whereas pitch piper Marsyas stands for the art of compromise, of harmony made simple, relying on fixed tuning and temperament. At the end of the contest Marsyas is declared the winner, upon which Apollo takes out his pocketknife and skins him alive. The legend is indirect subject of a longwinded treatise on the sanctity of harmony and moral risks of equal temperament, by J.S. Bach’s friend and mentor Andreas Werckmeister.

So pathetic a tale as ‘Michaelion’ relies heavily on surrealist wordplay to make its point. The listener is overwhelmed but left relatively unscathed under a chaos of dislocated syllables, real-time outbursts of the phonemic particles and burbling impulse showers of *Gesang der Jünglinge* from 1956. The reader, on the other hand, is sucked into a relentless play of Spot the Connection, a kind of parlour game in words of the surrealists’ *cadavre exquis*. Alien speech? I don’t think so. A fragment of interstellar dialogue *Proximallucicox – Althalucirix – Kameluytentix – Prolucimelonx – Eridamelukanix* reads like a random text from the comic *Asterix the Gaul*, from which one moves easily by word-association from *Asterix – Gaul – gall* to the proverbial *cup of yellow*. In similar fashion, an inexplicable, possibly sacrilegious action in which two of the camel’s hooves are polished, provokes the sequence *hoofshine – shoeshine – (the) shining – ‘zu schein, oder nicht zu schein’ – Hamlet – reflection – Wahrscheinlichkeit – polish – Polonius*, while we have already parsed the sequence *Camel – Hamlet – Mallarmé – Boulez*. All very Pythonesque, perhaps, until one realises that MEL, the root of *melody* and for years the familiar acronym of Michael, Eva,

and Luzifer, can equally be read as MEL, blackness, the root of *melatonin* and *melanoma*. In fact, ‘Michaelion’, or ‘*Michael-Lion*’, Leo being Stockhausen’s personal sign, is an anagram for *Melancholia*, the subject of Dürer’s engraving *Melencolia I*, depicting a despondent angel, looking very like the young Stockhausen on the cover of the Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper* album, seated among a shop window of emblems, including a magic square.

Unusually, the Operator appears to have been composed with a specific artist in mind, Michael Vetter, a virtuoso interpreter of *Spiral* from the 1960s, a score from the plus-minus series. His entire role in fact is a throwback to 1968, for Stockhausen a year of dark despair, of fasting, and of the intuitive text pieces *Aus den sieben Tagen*, including ‘Think nothing’, the composer’s personal testament to *degré zéro*. It is perhaps no coincidence that ‘Litanei’, the unperformed text of the 1968 collection, has been coopted into ‘Michaelion’ as putative conclusion or *apologia pro vita sua*, in lieu of a coda, to signal the end of the comedy: an ending leaving everyone, including the Operator, still up in the air.

*Lass den Witzling uns besticheln!
Glücklich, wenn ein deutscher Mann
Seinem Freunde, Vetter Micheln
Guten Abend bieten Kann.*¹⁴

Notes

1. ‘The passion for the Hindoo Joques seems to have been first excited by a code of Gentoo laws, ... not by the code itself, but by the translator’s preface, in which there are many solemn assertions impugning the Christian revelation, and giving the palm to Hindoo antiquity.’ Claudius Buchanan, *Memoir of the Expediency of an Ecclesiastical Establishment for British India*. Part II, Chapter 1. Cambridge: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1811, 23.
2. In ‘Moment-forming and MOMENTE’, from *Stockhausen on Music*. London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1989, 63–75.
3. A photograph of Pierre Schaeffer perched on a shorter but similar chair in a studio of the ORTF is reproduced in Remy Stricker, *La Musique Française: du Romantisme à nos jours*. Paris: La Documentation Française, 1966. There is something appealing about seeing Schaeffer as the original for Dirigent, and UNESCO the influence for Welt-Parlament.
4. My mistake. There were metronomes aplenty, and yet I have no memory of either seeing or hearing them. The best explanation I can give is that they were not employed as expected, to reference the “chopper” theme reinforced later by the helicopters, which in turn reference the role of the impulse generator (also called a “chopper” in electronic music. The stuttering bass, I now realise, is another “realist” clue to the potential role of the metronomes to modulate, and interfere with, individual voices of the choir, assuming each is separately miked (as in an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical).
5. ‘A real philosophy of history ought to bear in mind what for ever *is* and never *develops*. [The Hegelians] regard the whirling world as . . . the ultimate reality, and see its final meaning in a meagre bliss on earth—a hollow, deceptive, and sorry thing of which nothing essentially better can ever come through either constitutions, or legal codes, or steam engines, or telegraphs.’ Arthur Schopenhauer, cited by

Erich Heller in *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought*. Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1952, 60.

6. Swinging patients in a revolving chair to improve the flow of blood to the head was a concept revived by Erasmus Darwin and extensively trialled in the late 18th century by mental disorder specialist Joseph Mason Cox. Stephanie Pain, “The human centrifuge”, *New Scientist* 192.2576 (4 November 2006), 54–55.
7. Robin Maconie, *Other Planets: The Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen*. Lanham MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005, 400.
8. ‘The Chinese builds his world upon the harmonious action of the heavens and earth; regards the animation of all nature, the movement of the stars and the change of seasons, as a grand “world-music” in which everything keeps steadfastly in its appointed course, teaching mankind thereby a wholesome lesson. ... All their music has from time immemorial been under state supervision, in order to guard against the stealthy introduction of any tone contrary to ordinance. Here we already meet with the pernicious influence of a bureaucratic pedantic state, as well as that of the prosaic character of the Chinese, upon their music ... A people in whose tales and novels the climax culminates in the success or failure of the hero’s state-examination could not but possess very feeble notions of the tonal art.’ Emil Naumann, *Illustrierte Musikgeschichte* (1880–85); in English *History of Music* tr. F. Praeger, ed. F.A. Gore Ouseley. 2v. London: Cassell, 1886. Vol I, 8–9.
9. *Other Planets*, 177–78.
10. You are always referring to *my* music, *my* music. What does it mean, *my* music? It’s just something that has come into my mind and I am working all the time and that’s it. So: I am a *myth*, I am a name, and if I go away then they just attach on something that vibrates within yourself’. Stockhausen, cited in *Other Planets*, 2.-
11. Nihal is of Sinhalese extraction, in fact. But for Stockhausen’s generation, Ceylon, together with Pakistan and Bangladesh, was part of the same greater Indian subcontinent, the same patch of red on the world map.’
12. Roland Barthes, *Image – Music – Text* tr. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 1984, 124.
13. Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, 153.
14. The narrative thread by which Stockhausen’s Michael emerges from peasant child to saintly hero is an echo of the rise in German folklore of his terrestrial *alter ego* Der deutsche Michel, otherwise known as ‘Vetter Michel.’

Dannevirke: 2 October 2012; revised 13 February 2014

