

Sonntag aus Licht, Staatenhaus, Cologne

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Imagine being there for the world premiere of *Götterdämmerung*. Stockhausen's *Licht* cycle is arguably the *Ring* of our time, and the world premiere of its seventh and final part last weekend in Cologne felt like something so monumentally ambitious that the comparison could hold. Six years after its completion and three years after the composer's death, *Sonntag aus Licht* marks the consummation of Stockhausen's 29-hour cycle, its separate parts named for days of the week and attributed separate themes. *Licht* took Stockhausen 26 years to complete.

Stockhausen, like Wagner, inspires cultish devotion and means more to insiders than to musical tourists. True followers turned up to the Cologne premiere dressed in white, and understood the composer's immensely complex codes of colours, numbers, movements, and overlapping and interlocking super-formulas. The rest of us appreciated the decision to hand over stage direction to Roland Olbeter and Carlus Padrissa of La Fura dels Baus. The Catalan theatre-makers know better than most how to turn esoteric concept into visceral experience, and how to marry spectacle with ritual.

Sonntag, until now widely regarded as unperformable, is a posthumous homage from the composer's erstwhile home. The opera has poured vast resources into this project, taking over the city's cavernous Staatenhaus and building within it the two contrasting halls required for the performance.

Saturday's premiere was of the first three parts of *Sonntag*; the other two followed – appropriately enough – on Sunday. Parts one ("Light-Water") and two ("Angel-Procession") were performed in a round white space arranged into eight segments, with the audience half-recumbent on specially constructed recliners as huge white sails rotated above around a central pillar projecting images of stars and planets on to the walls and ceiling. Part three ("Light-Pictures") was held in a black rectangular hall, the audience issued with 3D glasses for a breathtaking series of further projections.

Like Wagner, Stockhausen had his own idiosyncratic views on religion. La Fura and the Cologne team read *Licht* as a fundamentally Catholic liturgy, focusing on the ecstatic, the transcendent and the sacramental in the piece. The immense musical complexity became almost incidental, a tribute to the meticulous musical preparation of conductor Peter Rundel, the instrumentalists of MusikFabrik, the participating choirs (from Amsterdam, Estonia and Cologne), the formidable soloists (tenor Hubert Mayer in particular), and the sound engineers. La Fura's gleeful excess is a perfect match for Stockhausen's extravagant vision of the divine.

Sonntag aus Licht is meant to be a bit like having died and gone to heaven, occupied with the business of singing praise to the creator. That demands from the beholder a certain willingness to suspend attachment to the temporal. Those who cannot might get a little bored, but many say the same of Wagner. Stockhausen's unique musical language impresses most for its startling sensuality and wild invention; the virtuosic display and elaborate structure blur in the sheer lushness of the whole. Cologne's *Sonntag* is one of the most gloriously bizarre experiences you are likely to have anywhere in music theatre, and well worth the considerable effort. ★★★★★☆

Cologne Opera

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