

WDR Festival “Seven Days of Electronic Music” Interview with Karlheinz Stockhausen (1971)

“Seven Days of Electronic Music” is the title of the small festival being presented by the West German Radio (WDR) in Cologne right now. Can you briefly explain the concept of this presentation?

Whoever is listening to the radio right now, wherever you are: Please listen for a moment! Music (you might be thinking), and especially electronic music, doesn't interest me! I say: Music is the language of the future. The Babylonian babble and the nonsense that one bit of information can be exchanged for another must stop. Please listen for a moment!

What is electronic music?

Despite very much resistance here in Cologne, we have been able to organize a seven-day account about the kind of electronic music which is currently being presented by the most important studios in the world.

What is it? It is music. It isn't made only by violins and trumpets and flutes or sung by a voice, but rather by electricity. And that is all. Just as you use electricity in your household for every little thing, it is gradually becoming natural to use electricity and all machines that are run by electricity to make music.

Now, one might say: That has nothing to do with me!

But it does have something to do with you!

Because we must find a musical language, with which I no longer say: Aha, that sounds like the language of the Balinese. Or: Aha, that is like the music of the Arabs. Whereby we often think of particular instruments: of Gamelan, for example. Or in the case of Arabs, these oboe-like instruments that are typical for Arabian music. We must find music that is planetary; i.e. we don't care at all where it comes from. Because we cannot even know anymore where it comes from. It consists of vibrations. And with these vibrations, some people – musicians, composers – communicate what is in the air. What is important. We must unite this world. And that is only possible by using the language of music and not English or Esperanto.

During these days we will attempt (regardless of how many people happen to be sitting here in Cologne or are able to come in the afternoon, since most of them are still at their jobs when it begins already at half past three in the afternoon and lasts until ten o'clock every day, for seven days) to perform selected works that have been composed during the last three or four years in the various studios – i.e. from Utrecht, Columbia University, Buffalo University, Princeton Centre in the U.S.A., Warsaw, Tokyo NHK, Swedish Radio, Danish Radio, Finnish Radio, Cologne Radio, Paris Studio. Firstly.

Secondly: We have invited two English ensembles to come to Cologne: “Gentle Fire” from London and “Intermodulation” from Cambridge, because they are particularly representative of England. Each group plays two evenings. They begin already at noon at the *Domplatz* by playing a so-called musical signal. That is to say: This is not my idea, but the idea of the organisational director of the Electronic Music Studio of the West German Radio, Dr. Tomek, the predecessor of the current director, Dr. Becker. So we had the idea: We will plan this week in an – unfortunately not yet finished – building shell of a museum. And it will begin every day already at three o'clock. At half past three there will be a lecture, by a different person every day: by an Equadoran, [Mesias] Maiguashca, by a Belgian, Henri Pousseur, introduction and concluding lectures by me, then by another studio collaborator, [Volker] Müller, then by Dr. Becker: The theme for all of them is the future role, or significance, of electronic music.

Then tapes will be played: One hour. Then a live performance by one of the ensembles. Our ensemble – when I say “our”, then I mean: Aloys Kontarsky, Christoph Caskel, then Harald Bojé, then Peter Eötvös, a Hungarian, then Joachim Krist, a young German; people, some of whom are already world-famous, such as Kontarsky or Bojé; also Eötvös is already well-known because of our ensemble that travels throughout the world: We have finished the first day. We played live at 6 o'clock in the afternoon, then that evening we played live again for over one hour. Yesterday evening “Gentle Fire” played, this evening again; then another two days with “Intermodulation”. Then: La Monte Young, an American who collaborates with an Indian, will perform for an evening and then an afternoon. And finally next Sunday, as the final concert, another American: Terry Riley.

This festival not only offers a stock-taking of the current situation, but also in a sense a retrospective of electronic music after two decades of existence. You yourself have decisively influenced the development of this medium as a composer, as long-term collaborator and later as

the director of the Electronic Music Studio of the WDR. Which were the most important stages of this development in your opinion?

The first stage, I think, is that one makes music synthetically – including all the teething troubles. Today, I can say that after 18 years, we are as far as nuclear research was after 18 years, or space research. In the case of music, we hardly ever receive large amounts of money because most people say: No matter how the future develops technologically, music is of minor importance. That is the huge misunderstanding, that one does hardly anything anymore for the condition of the human soul, but rather more for his transportation or for his stomach or for his technical environment.

Synthetic production of music is as important as the synthetic industry in the production of commodities, of articles for daily use. That means, namely, that one can produce all possible sound processes from a particular basic material, not only in the studio, but also live, in groups. That one uses electronic instruments. And uses these new devices during creative musical activity. That is one aspect. That was the beginning. Because of that, something spiritual comes into play that is much more important and of course is the only thing that gives the technological aspect meaning.

I said that already at the beginning today. And that is why I so urgently asked you to interrupt your daily activities and to listen for a moment. The purpose is to find a sonic language that goes beyond our word language. That recreates a connection between people – via processes of the soul, processes of the spirit. And I am completely convinced that this medium is like what the futurologists call an “early warning system”. That is not all. There is also something that these sound processes announce, filtered by the individual artists who are especially sensitive beings, like the Roman augurs, who could look into the future: That something is being announced that will be important for all of us, for all of humanity in the future. New spaces will be created, new temporal relationships that, when one experiences them by simply listening, change us and somehow prepare us for the future approaching us. And that is why music is such an unbelievably important medium for the future.

In your lecture at the beginning of the week, you pointed out the problems associated with studio work and the conservation of electronic pieces. Where do the specific difficulties of electronic music lie? And what possibilities are available to overcome them?

Well, the unbelievable part of technological progress is that the more refined our means become, the more mortal what we produce with these means becomes. That is really very, very important. The tapes that we produced during the years from 1953 until 1957 – I mean the beginning of the 1950's – already today sound like old films when it is raining. The tapes are already beginning to fall apart. To date, there is no way to qualitatively preserve music on tape for all time – or say even for a long time. In some works, if I may speak of myself, in *GESANG DER JÜNGLINGE*, which so many people have heard, and in *KONTAKTE*, on which I worked for almost two years, so much work and time and energy of my life and the lives of the technicians involved is invested, that it would make sense for as many people as possible who want to, to be able to listen to them. But they can't.

Because this kind of thing takes about thirty years to become known: Until people even know that there is such a thing. Secondly: Until all of these idiotic social barriers fall and I am treated, let's say, just like people treat composers nowadays who are dead. That is, when it is no longer discussed whether or not it makes sense. But rather, one is happy that it exists at all. That culture exists. Independent of what individuals think about the quality of my music: That is no longer important in this context. But rather Mahler is Mahler, a composer. Or Debussy is Debussy. Whether certain individuals want it or not. Thank God we have a few artists left: So that is what I mean.

Of course it would be good to conserve that: to conserve it for all of humanity. Because if a new generation somewhere, say in Japan, wants to know what was created in this world in this century, in terms of important, spiritual messages, in whatever medium, say in music or in a visual form, then they should have that chance. But: That is technically not possible at the moment. And it would cost a great deal of money to store music for example in a binary language, as they call it, in a computer language. First one would have to transform it – music, like it sounds – into this special electric language, and then – in the hope that there will be a machine available in fifty or a hundred years that can transform it back into music – one could store it that way. And that would be better preserved. We have neither the money nor the means

to do this. That is because most money – at least in this country – is still being spent on weapons. If, as I read last week, 153 Starfighters have, how do they put it? - “fallen from the sky”, crashed, treated by the German army like toys, and you think about what one them costs: With that money, we could build a whole series of electronic studios – for music that would serve very many people, of course, because the people could buy the records or listen to this music on the radio and could really transform themselves using this music – while I myself couldn’t give a damn whether one Starfighter more or less goes down. There you see the fatality of our situation. Basically, our social situation is still very anti-artistic. And I have no illusions that this is going to change in the near future in the face of the population explosion.

How do you see the present situation and the future possibilities of electronic media?

Well, that should not be generalised. It is still determined by personalities. Despite the general trend of chopping off the heads of personalities and only building collectives as much as possible, in which people race around like ants in anthills with no heads if possible, it is clearly evident that a few individual composers have reached a relatively large number of people with what they have created – whether using the medium of electronic music or the classical medium. I am lucky – I have earned half of that at the most, by working day and night – that I reach very many people with electronic music. And even in Germany now, although I am a German and of course I have the most difficult time in Germany – it is always the most difficult in your own country – I have become well-known with my music in schools, in music classes – and in the meantime I can say, in all high schools (German: *Gymnasien*, grades 5-12 or 13, Transl. note) with the electronic music I have created. Not only that but also with choral and orchestral works – that is not that important then. Yesterday, a high school teacher who was at the afternoon presentation told me: “You will be amazed, but we have set up a little studio at our high school, and the boys are already making electronic music, experimentally. There is a wonderful synthesis of physics and music classes, and of acoustics and perception psychology.”

In the meantime there is already a whole series of books in Germany, schoolbooks that prepare these young people in a very good way, I really must say. And what more positive a thing can one wish for?

We come closer and closer to what I am saying: to the zero hour. That is: until now we have always been running behind ourselves. Behind ourselves as composers. We always thought: Yes,

it will take thirty years or two generations until people are interested. And everyone was saying: "I am a genius. But the present doesn't recognise me". Increasingly, information is becoming so fast, that it catches up. And one can almost already say that within a few years' time, the people who have achieved something extraordinary, who have engaged themselves in a medium, for whom their whole life is music for example, will for the most part find their audience as they never have before.

You know yourself: We sat together at this table the last time two years ago after I returned from the World Expo in Osaka, and I told you that I made music for circa one million people, 183 days long, five and one half hours a day. That would have been unthinkable during any earlier epoch. Composers like, say Pousseur, or Berio, or also like Cage, but also a lot of younger ones like, let's say Davidovsky or König: They had all already become renowned by their electronic music on records. There is a certain popularity on an unusual scale for electronic music. That is the current situation. And that is increasing. So, I think that the famous gap between the artists and the audience is constantly shrinking because of the speed of information – and the means of communication. Look: You are listening to me for example – that is, if you are still listening to me.

And what do you think of the works by your English and American colleagues that were also presented during this week?

Do you mean the two groups I just spoke about?

The two English groups and also Terry Riley and La Monte Young.

Well, they haven't performed anything yet this week. Both are, as I say, toy producers. But you must not forget that Stockhausen said that. Terry Riley as well as La Monte Young make music that I would call very elegant, noble decoration music. These tapes remind one of the wonderful writing of the Islam, Islamic art, that is a non-representative, non-figurative, but an ornamental, arabesque-rich music. That applies to both. However, I must say that both produce a kind of drug effect with their music by using repetitions. That is, in the general fashion of the drug age, they are a very legitimate expression of what many expect from music: namely not to be spoken to in

an especially constructive or linguistic way, but rather in the form of an environment, an atmosphere. And they both do that very well with this lulling principle of repetition.

That also applies to other Americans who we have heard here in January, as you remember. That is La Monte Young. La Monte Young is now – a very religious person. Not in an the denominational sense, but really a deeply religious person. And the music is at the same time prayer music, there is no doubt about that. One doesn't think of particular words. But when one listens to it, one reaches a very pure and cleansed inner mood. One becomes very quiet and listens to oneself, more towards the inside than to a something spectacular. There is nothing spectacular in this music. You could say something similar about Riley. That is a very positive trend in contemporary music.

The English do something similar. "Gentle Fire" is, as the name says: a softly shimmering fire. Last night they played a piece of mine, among others. And I must say, they played my piece the best. The other one was by Cage, I felt they did not play it well, it was much too rough. But the way they played my piece was truly fine in the sound shaping. And – I closed my eyes while I was listening – I had an unbelievably enlarged spatial experience: That was fantastic. The sounds melted together so much that I couldn't even hear the individual instruments anymore. And in these weaving, very slowly gliding sound layers, my imagination was wonderfully free. And I really had the feeling that I was moving around in outer space in a non-descriptive way. That was very beautiful.

The members of the other group, "Intermodulation" – we could wait and see, but I already know the players – are also all very young. I mean, they are all in their early twenties, not even, these players: young guys. And they have a strong tendency towards the experimental. So one must not always compare them with the large and finished traditional masterworks, but rather their élan is the main thing, this creative élan. And that they play day and night. And what they play is original, I must say. The sound is original. And the selection of pieces is always new. So that is the most important thing in this context: That they always do something new.

Are you working on a new electronic work at the time being, or are you planning something?

Yes, I will certainly create a large piece with this medium from time to time – time for time, that is every three or four years. Practically all of my pieces – even when I use vocalists or traditional instruments – need these electro-acoustic possibilities in order to create a sound world of their own, for every piece. At the moment I am not working on any piece, because this year is dedicated to performance practice in its broadest sense. I went on long tours with our group and conducted several orchestras for performances of my works; that is in Europe and America. And I will be rehearsing for the rest of the year. Because I think that performing music is just important for me as composing music, because I learn so much for composing by performing, that I couldn't compose without the performances. So we are on tour until the end of the year performing the large work MOMENTE. And then I will compose a new piece.

No, wait, we will perform a world première, I forgot to mention that: In Liège, Belgium, in September. And these means will play a role, of course in a very modest function. It is a work that will take place in 14 rooms. And in each room it will be specifically demonstrated how sound vibrations change humans or other matter. For example, food will be magnetised by tones, liquids will become visible using sound waves, changed by tones – modulated, as we say. There is one room, where a well-known biologist, Dr. Kneutgen, synchronises sturgeon fish by sound waves, by certain tones in the breathing rhythm, so that the fish move in the rhythm of the music. What we will make clear in each room – and I have described the situation in the rooms – is how sound waves always change the molecules, even the atoms of a being who listens to music, making them vibrate. And that is what we want to make visible, because most people only believe what they see.

Thank you very much.

You are welcome.

