

Out of the Blue

The sidereal Karlheinz Stockhausen takes to the skies once again **BY JOE MILUTIS**

The bird, the dreamer, the ghost, the radio wave, the galactic ray, and the musician share a kind of astral flight that obsessed Karlheinz Stockhausen throughout his career. It is not surprising, then, that his idea for the *Helicopter String Quartet* started off as a dream of flight, and its realization would, as with

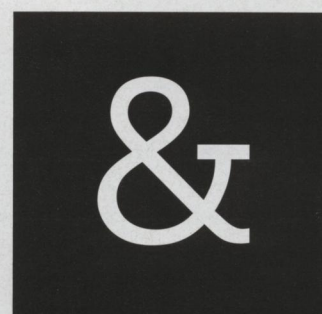
any dream, engage the sensibilities of waking life only at its peril.

"In order to describe a bird, you first have to kill it," Stockhausen has said regarding these fragile airborne arts. Unfortunately, his aviary of finicky transmitters, classically trained musicians, state arts bureaucracies, helicopter charters, and concert venue logistics can't help but kill the bird, or at least cage it (and we're not talking John Cage). So, at one point midway through Frank Scheffer's recently released documentary of the 1995 event, (now available from Medici Arts) Stockhausen sits seemingly abashed at a console, reflecting on the ultimate failure of translating his dream via this command-

control-klang assemblage. He admits that the result is too earthy—a perverse description for an endeavor more reminiscent of the mechanical Gesamtkunstwerk of modern warfare than of sticking one's toes in the mud.

Stockhausen often gets described as if he's Lt. Col. Kilgore from *Apocalypse Now*—that psychopathic yet loveable mook whose helicopter squadron will destroy a village, while blasting Wagner, just for a chance to surf. It's unfortunate that the doc, and to a certain extent the piece itself, plays into that cliché, because—aside from some interesting camera moves and sound montage—it's all rather flat and matter of fact. There's no historical context, no psychoanalysis of the dreamwork, and no sense of space—the last, at least, of utter importance to this particular artist. So we are left with the "Stockhausen" of the journalists, full of the stereotypes of German genius: egomaniacal, fanatical, and super-disciplined (although the perceptive viewer will notice that he is, for the most part, remarkably mild-mannered while orchestrating the complexities of the event).

Yet—and perhaps because of deep connections with a fascist past—Stockhausen could be just as granola as Cage and Pauline Oliveros. Here's a guy who composed with musical units he called "I-moments" (moments of indeterminacy or informality), asked musicians to play and mix the various vibrations they felt in their bodies (and the universe), and was constantly vigilant to stale repetition and predictable musical ordering. The problem with the *Quartet*, as well as the documentary that follows its surfaces a little too reverently, is not that it demonstrates the fancy of some whacked-out German avant-gardist (the bourgeois complaint), nor that it's gimmicky and relies too much on the helicopter element rather than guiding the audience into the materiality of pure sound (the



modernist complaint), but that it's too traditional. It very well may be the most orthodox piece in Stockhausen's entire oeuvre.

There's no processing of either the sound of the helicopter rotors—a missed opportunity, especially with an artist whose canonic contribution may be the expansion of the art of the oscillator—or the strings. The performances are transmitted to a unified theatrical space; and the *Quartet* is, by Stockhausen's own admission, one of the most conservatively controlled pieces he has ever done, more militarily regimented than cosmically aloft. The problem may be rooted in the comparatively square institutions of music that prevail in the work, which would perhaps have been better realized as sound sculpture or installation art. Maybe, again like installation art, you had to be there, but I get the sense that the kind of multidirectional, bird-aspiring soundwork that Stockhausen really wanted can be found instead in the DIY transmission art and punk derangement of contemporary noise artists—for which we have him, partly, to thank. If only he had let the copters run rampant across the landscape, broadcasting randomly into homes. As the rotor noises could be heard in the distance, radio and television signals would be interrupted, and the flight commander would speak: "Good morning, everyone. This is Karlheinz Stockhausen. Are you listening?" □

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