

Saturday 15 June 10pm Britten Studio, Snape

Stockhausen: Kontakte

Pierre-Laurent Aimard piano

Samuel Favre percussion

Marco Stroppa electronics

Sat
15

Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928–2007)

Kontakte, for piano, percussion and four-track tape (1958–60)

Electronic realization: Studio of electronic music of the WDR Radio in Cologne, Germany.

Assistant: Gottfried Michael König.



Archive of the Stockhausen Foundation for Music, Kürten, Germany

Stockhausen at the time of Kontakte in Studio II of the WDR Cologne with a tone oscillator (a continuously variable generator, switchable between sine-, square- and sawtooth wave forms), which is standing on a turntable selective amplifier (feed-back filter).

With support from
Fiona MacKenzie and John Cornish

Sun
16

Electronic music is a young genre. The first electro-mechanical instruments appeared at the end of the 19th century (the Telharmonium was developed by Thaddeus Cahill in 1897); they were huge, immensely heavy devices (the mark II version of the Telharmonium weighed almost 200 tonnes.), unwieldy to maintain and played mostly through an organ-like keyboard. Only the ondes martenot, the descendants of the Hammond organ and some rare performers of the theremin still survive.

A major change appeared in the 1950s, mainly in the studios of European radio companies, such as those in Paris, Milan and Cologne. Each studio fostered its own approach to electronic music and gave rise to a large repertoire of pieces that differed greatly from studio to studio. However, they all shared a similar concern: rather than using large-scale, purpose-built instruments, the practice of electronic music was instead reduced to a set of elementary sound-generators and processors, whose sounds were recorded, combined and further manipulated. The composer-performer of the old instruments gave way to the composer-organizer of electronic material.

Kontakte is probably the most important work composed during this phase in the development of electronic music. It is perhaps the only electronic piece of that time that has been regularly performed since its premiere, and certainly ranks as a masterpiece in the long history of Western music.

How did Stockhausen manage to accomplish such a feat? I believe that the young composer, then in his early 30s, who had just finished another masterpiece, *Gruppen*, for three orchestras, had by then attained an ideal balance between pure inspiration, creative thrust, theoretical depth, expressive power and technological proficiency. The sheer quality and variety of sound that he succeeded in creating, despite the limited electronic tools available at that time, are simply prodigious.

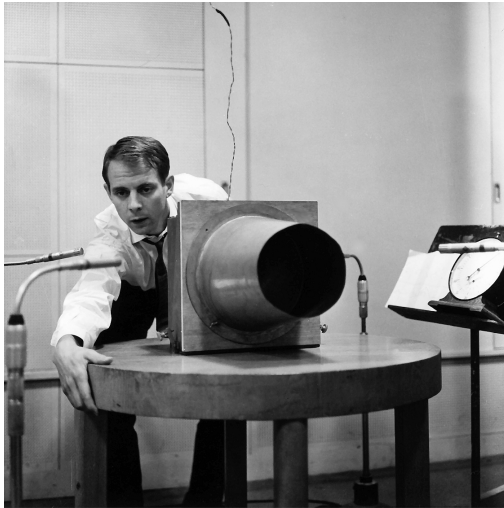
When examined from any of these perspectives, *Kontakte* is a truly impressive work. The first version, which is still performed today, is for electronics alone. Stockhausen later added a part for piano and percussion over the same electronics. As the composer wrote, the title ('Contacts') 'refers both to contacts between instrumental and electronic sound groups [...] and between various forms of spatial

movement'. It is also an exploration of contacts between other properties of music, such as timbre, pitch, intensity and duration. 'In the preparatory work, I found, for the first time, ways to bring all properties under a single control', wrote Stockhausen in 1962. This was a long-standing goal of total serialism, a compositional technique that was widely used at that time.

If the contacts between the instrumental and the electronic timbres are easy to perceive, one famous example illustrates how originally this idea is further elaborated. At the centre of the piece, a high and loud electronic tone begins a long and continuous descent, which, at first, sounds like a wavering glissando. However, when it becomes too low, the pitch gradually turns into a series of pulses (percussive, electronic sounds produced by a pulse generator), which, in turn, progressively slow down, decrease in volume and acquire their own pitch (an E, the major 3rd above the lowest note of the cello). Two ways of thinking about pitch (as a rapid succession of pulses, and as the pitch of the pulse itself) are packed into a single, unbroken and spectacular effect. This kind of contact would be impossible to realize with acoustic instruments. When the pulse is slow enough, the piano delicately joins in (C sharp to E); it is a beautiful, intimate moment in the piece.

Another striking dimension of *Kontakte* is its use of spatial movement. Stockhausen had to invent a new device: four microphones, placed on the four corners of a virtual square, surrounded a directional loudspeaker on a turntable. By switching some microphones on and off, and varying the speed of rotation, the composer managed to generate different spatial movements that were totally unheard of at that time. A 'spatial polyphony' therefore accompanies the inherent polyphony of the electronics, generating magnificent and dynamic sonic patterns that swirl around the audience.

From a formal point of view, the piece employs the concept of 'moment form', which Stockhausen defined as any 'formal unit in a particular composition that is recognizable by a personal and unmistakable character'. The aim was to create 'immediately intense' forms, without climaxes and predictable developmental directions, as though the piece had 'always already commenced, and could continue forever'. This totally new concept immediately caught



Stockhausen with one of his directional loudspeakers on a turntable, designed by the composer for *Kontakte*

the attention of musicologists and theoreticians, and gave rise to an abundant academic literature.

Kontakte is divided into 16 'Strukturen', some of which are further decomposed, adding to a total amount of 25 sections or 'moments'. Even if there is no obvious, linear narrative form, and that in each 'Struktur' 'a minimum or maximum can be expected in every moment', the perception of the large form

does reveal some compelling musical climaxes, as the descending glissando mentioned above, or the moment where both players walk to the centre of the stage and hit the large tam tam and gong with all their force. The piece also begins and ends in a quiet atmosphere, suggesting a sort of arch form, at least from the perspective of the intensity.

What is the legacy of *Kontakte* more than half a century after its premiere? The technology of that time has been replaced by laptop computers that run zillions of times faster and more precisely than the devices that Stockhausen could use. Yet, no other *Kontakte* exists, and this work continues to communicate an astounding power and expressivity every time it is experienced in a concert hall.

I believe that the time of music does not run linearly, but proceeds by means of fractures. These are 'moments' when a composer suddenly manages to break through into a new realm, and bring both music and the listeners into another dimension – a dimension that redefines the musical world of the previous generation. *Kontakte* is undoubtedly one of the greatest fractures of the second half of the 20th century. I hope you will enjoy listening to this work with the same pleasure and thrill that the musicians experience when performing it.

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Sunday 16 June 2.30pm Peter Pears Recital Room, Snape

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