
LETTER TO THE EDITOR

From Robin Maconie

Oliver Soden is an engaging new contributor to *Tempo* and I am delighted he has taken my crabby review of Stockhausen to task (*Tempo* Vol. 67, No. 265, p. 121). He is quite right to do so. I would gladly discuss my ‘negative conclusions’ with him at length if for the life of me I knew what he is referring to, since Mr Soden does not appear to recognize objections most of which are technical in nature and all of which are clearly spelt out in black and white in my review.

Whether DJ Nihal is Anglo-Indian or Anglo-Ceylonese is neither here nor there. The point that matters is that he represents a fusion of English and what used to be called Continental Indian cultures, following the same convention of treating exotic peoples as generic ‘Indians’ as did Purcell in *The Indian Queen* and Rameau in *Les Indes Galantes*. The relatively benign but tangibly racist consciousness in Stockhausen’s musical output in works as varied as *Hymnen*, *Mikrophonie II* and *Telemusik* is as distasteful and significant today as Debussy’s disdain a hundred years ago for ‘la musique nègre’ when referring to the rag-time idiom of ‘Gollywog’s Cakewalk’ or Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps*. I am making the point that for this production, we should recognize that skin colour was a factor. Yellow and red are the colours of *Mittwoch*, and that includes people. I can live with that, but others may not. *Tempo* readers should at least have a choice.

I attended the dress rehearsal and two other full performances, which is to say, I endured more than 15 hours of sometimes crippling discomfort, in the aftermath of a further continuous 40 or so hours’ flight from New Zealand to attend. Physical discomfort is not an excuse for complaint unless it is being used, as I suspect in this case, as a cover for production inadequacies, and as a deliberate distraction. That the same tactics were employed by Goebbels at mass rallies in the 1930s – ‘a weary audience is a more impressionable audience’ – makes a grotesque kind of historical sense if deployed to cover up technical and other production deficiencies.

Technical issues include sound projection and movement in space, and the translation of electronic sounds moving in artificial space into real players moving in real space. Inside the building audio quality was acceptable, but hardly three-dimensional or holographic. Outside the building (e.g., the *Helicopter-String Quartet*) spatial movement was physically real but for the audience, aurally confined to fixed speakers and large screens. The contradictions were overwhelming. Nothing worked quite as one was led to anticipate. Players swinging in midair were physically suspended but their music otherwise bereft of movement, and their (projected) sound also fixed in space. The most challenging final scene, *Michaelion*, in which a polyphony of ribbons of sound should interweave in a very much more mobile way, as suggested by the score choreography, also failed to deliver, partly due to the impossible logistics of the environment, and partly because the sounds of voices and instruments cannot be directed like laser beams without some kind of technical intervention. This and other fundamental problems, along with the role of the Operator as receiver and transmitter of voices in an outer space in which sound does not travel, were left high and dry by the composer, challenges for future generations to deal with as and when they reach a position to recognize them; and no amount of adhering to the existing score is going to change that.

In the three performances I attended I looked closely out for and did not once see or hear any metronomes. What I did observe were groups of ‘skilled’ and ‘dedicated’ performers with no idea (excepting perhaps the string quartet) of why they were doing what they were doing, or how all of what they were doing should fit together. What is the point of skill and dedication if you have no idea? Why was the sudden departure of the choir conductor not a moment of intense drama? (he does not return). Why were the performances of the swinging players of *Orchester-Finalisten* not in the least bit terrified? I do not believe Graham Vick – or his advisors – ever intended or were even capable of interpreting Stockhausen’s musical symbolism. Given the

acoustical challenges of the location – a chemical factory, for God’s sake, which I would compare to staging a performance of Britten’s *The Burning Fiery Furnace* at Auschwitz – Team Stockhausen are no less to blame for the non-realization of Stockhausen’s dramatic and technical demands. Having lived with this music for some considerable time I am bound to protest at the

trivialization of the composer’s dramatic intentions by those entrusted with preserving his legacy and reputation.

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