

STOCKHAUSEN'S *DONNERSTAG AUS LICHT* AND GNOSTICISM

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The German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, born in 1928, made his reputation as a member of the postwar European avant-garde, alongside Pierre Boulez, Luciano Berio, Luigi Nono, and other composers who have since faded from public view. Stockhausen's place in the history of music was secured by the brilliant series of works he produced in the 1950s and '60s: *Kontra-punkte*, *Klavierstücke I–XI*; *Zeitmasse* for woodwinds; *Gruppen* for three orchestras; the electronic *Gesang der Jünglinge*; *Zyklus* for a percussionist; *Carré* for four orchestras and four choruses; *Kontakte* for electronic sounds, piano, and percussion; *Momente* for soprano, singers, and instruments; *Hymnen* for electronic sounds; *musique concrète* and orchestra; *Stimmung* for six vocalists; and so on. These works created a new world of sound, through electronic music and the use of space, and new concepts of form, both through serial organization and through allowing a role to chance or choice.

Since 1977, Stockhausen has abandoned the composition of single works and devoted himself to one gigantic project: a cycle of seven operas collectively called *Licht* (Light), scheduled for completion early in the next century. The separate operas are called after the days of the week. As of 1994, four of them have been performed (*Donnerstag*, *Samstag*, *Montag*, *Dienstag*) and three recorded (*Donnerstag*, *Samstag*, *Montag*).¹

Stockhausen creates not only the music of his operas, but also the words, gestures, and much of the visual design, and controls the electronic side of all the performances. One can scarcely imagine the labor that goes into this, and the obstacles he has to overcome in getting such unconventional works produced in conventional opera houses. Until 1993, when the Tuesday opera, *Dienstag aus Licht*, was premiered in Leipzig, no German opera house would stage his works. *Donnerstag*, *Samstag*, and *Montag* were all premiered at La Scala, Milan.

Stockhausen puzzles and embarrasses the average critic, impresario, and orchestral musician through being so obviously “spiritual.” The other notoriously religious composer of the avant-garde, Olivier Messiaen, is more acceptable because he is easier for them to classify: as a lovable eccentric, whose music commands respect despite the Catholic theology with which it is decked out. But Stockhausen fits into no convenient pigeonhole. He apparently accepts all religions, East and West, North and South, and makes no secret of his belief in reincarnation and astrology. In contrast to Messiaen’s humility and self-effacement, Stockhausen leaves one in no doubt of how he sees himself. As soon as he admitted to an interviewer (see below) that he was a being from Sirius who had incarnated on earth to fulfill a special mission through music, his credibility among “intellectuals” vanished. Whereas once he had been in the vanguard, in the epoch of Deconstruction he became as unfashionable as can be: in brief, he appeared to be that despicable thing, a “New Ager.” Yet the impulses and convictions that some find embarrassing are the very ones that give him the will and the imagination to carry through his immense project, at a time when the other old avant-gardists are either silent or repeating themselves.

The seven-opera cycle of *Licht*, unlike Wagner’s *Ring of the Nibelung*, is truly cyclical, in that it has no beginning or ending. In the cosmologies of the Orient, time is an ever-rolling wheel, not a straight line leading from the Creation to the Last Judgment. Death on Saturn’s day (the theme of the opera *Samstag*) is only the prelude to marriage and conception on the Sun’s day (*Sonntag*) and rebirth on the Moon’s day (*Montag*). Then comes war on Mars’s day (*Dienstag*), reconciliation on Mercury’s or Woden’s day (*Mittwoch*), incarnation on Jupiter’s or Thor’s day (*Donnerstag*), and temptation on Venus’s or Freia’s day (*Freitag*). Stockhausen says: “[I]t doesn’t start anywhere. I composed *Thursday* first, but the week in *Licht* is a spiral without end”²—a formal concept already present in earlier pieces such as *Zyklus* and *Spiral*.

The musical organization of *Licht* also reflects the composer’s cosmology, which in this respect is thoroughly up-to-date. The principle resembles that of fractals: the mathematical patterns in which the part is a replication of the whole. The entire cycle is based on a threefold musical germ or, as Stockhausen calls it, a “triple formula.” It comprises Michael’s formula of thirteen notes, Eve’s formula of twelve, and

Lucifer's formula of eleven. Each formula includes not only pitches but also specific dynamics, rhythms, silences, vocalizations, etc. On the largest scale, the formulas control the entire cycle of operas. On the smallest, they are frequently perceptible as leitmotifs.

Stockhausen's vision of the formula as key to Hermetic correspondences goes beyond the material world. As he says: "[T]he formula is the matrix and plan of micro- and macroform, but also at the same time the psychic gestalt and vibrational image of a supramental manifestation" (TM, 5:667). The roots of this attitude lie far back, in the "total serialism" that Stockhausen and other composers were using in the 1950s, in which every parameter of a piece was integrated through permutations of a single series. Even then, it was with a spiritual intention that Stockhausen (a practicing Catholic at the time) paid tribute to the Creator by making every aspect of his microcosmic universe rational and complete. As his biographer Michael Kurtz says, this early music "was not the expression of human feelings and passions, but rather an attempt at a re-creation, a reconstitution of cosmic order and natural laws in sounds."³ With the formulaic composition of *Licht*, the correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm comes far closer to that of nature itself. As with a fractal, the same pattern is perceived at every degree of complexity, or, as one might say, at every level of reality.

The three principal characters of *Licht* are Michael, Eve, and Lucifer. In the first act of *Donnerstag* we see Michael as a child with his mother and father, then as an adolescent discovering the feminine, then being examined and approved in his various talents. In the second act, Michael makes a musical journey round the world, culminating in a symbolic crucifixion and ascension. The third act takes place in heaven, as Michael is welcomed home again, to the accompaniment of invisible choirs singing extracts from Hebrew apocryphal literature.

Stockhausen said in an interview of 1981 that

Michael is the creator-angel who now directs our universe. Creator-angels can create an entire universe in their own image. They go on creating until they see that the process has reached its fullness, and makes sense in every respect. Only then can a second process of inner working and perfection start, when the fullness is no longer increasing. Our universe is still taken up with the process of creating the fullness, and the second process, where the creation settles, fer-

ments, and harmonizes, has not yet quite begun. Everything is still experimental, and creation is still going on.

Michael is the master of our universe. He manifests himself in various forms, just as a person manifests in his works and his children. (TM, 6:203)

Unusually for Stockhausen, these fundamental ideas have a definite and modern source: *The Urantia Book*.⁴ Michael Kurtz tells of how the composer was introduced to *Urantia* by a New York hippie in 1971, and of how he urged his students to study it while he was using some of its ideas in *Inori* during 1974.⁵ *Urantia* is a text of over two thousand pages, obtained in 1934-35 through the mediumship of Wilfrid C. Kellogg (died 1956), a Chicago businessman and member of the Kellogg's Cornflakes family. He spoke the messages in trance, each of them being "signed" by an angelic source; they were taken down and edited by Dr. William S. Sadler, a psychiatrist and Seventh Day Adventist minister.⁶ *Urantia*'s doctrines are consistent with Adventism, a movement that began in 1844 with the revelations of Ellen White. But the Kellogg-Sadler revelations go much further, presenting a panorama of cosmic and human history, then a year-by-year account of Jesus' life.

Stockhausen, always independent-minded, did not slavishly adopt the *Urantia* doctrines, but his admiration for the book led to several of its ideas being incorporated in *Donnerstag*. In act 1 (Michael's Youth) the name "CHRIST MICHAEL" comes twice, highlighted in capital letters in the libretto.⁷ The equation of Christ with Michael is one of the main doctrines of *Urantia*, as of the original Adventism. In act 2 of *Donnerstag* (Third Examination), the Jury calls Michael "Michael of Nebadon."⁸ *Urantia* uses these terms frequently, stating: "Sometimes we refer to the sovereign of your universe Nebadon as Christ Michael."⁹ The name of the earth in *Urantia* is Satania; in *Donnerstag*, act 3, Michael says to Lucifer: "You have seduced all Satania with your false freedom."¹⁰ Shortly afterwards, he refers to Lucifer having reigned over "six hundred and seven inhabited worlds,"¹¹ while his source states that this earth (whose name is "Urantia") is "the 606th world in this local system on which the long evolutionary life process culminated in the appearance of human beings."¹² Michael's words: "You have been a terror for two hundred thousand years"¹³ agree with *Urantia*'s dating of Lucifer's rebellion.¹⁴ As for Michael himself, according to *Urantia* he is one of the

“Creator Sons” who must appear on each of the seven levels of being before he can become the creator of, and ruler over, a universe of his own. Incarnation as a human is the seventh and last in this series of incarnations, after which he returns to the “right hand of the Father,”¹⁵ as we see Michael returning in the third act of *Donnerstag*. Finally, Michael’s emblem of three concentric sky-blue circles, prominent in the staging and design of *Donnerstag*, comes directly from *The Urantia Book*, where it appears (as a registered trademark!) on the title page.

Urantia, like most channeled scriptures, has a strong preference for its own religion, giving to the Judeo-Christian tradition an importance far exceeding any other. Stockhausen is not so parochial. The choruses of “Michael’s Homecoming” welcome Michael as “Son of God, Guardian Spirit of Mankind, Light, Hermes-Christos, Thor-Donar.” In a later interview, Stockhausen says:

This Michael is soon recognized as emanation of the Michael known from the earliest times, who is called in the Germanic languages Donar or Thor, Toth by the Egyptians, Hermes by the Greeks, Jupiter by the Romans. . . . In the oldest tradition, which goes back to the Indian one, Michael is Mithra, and among the Hebrews he is the guardian spirit of the whole people, just as he is the folk-saint of the Germans.¹⁶

With these words we leave the influence of *The Urantia Book* and move on to consider Stockhausen’s myths in a wider context. To the academic mythologist his syncretism may have its shortcomings. But Stockhausen, like all great creative artists, is a mythographer—a creator of myths in his own right—rather than a mythologist or commentator on them. His Michael figure is first a demiurge or subsidiary creator, responsible for making one universe among myriads of others. Second, he is an avatar or divine incarnation, voluntarily taking human birth in order to give certain gifts to the earth—in this case, music. Third, he is an incomplete being, who needs to discover for himself what human life is like. Incarnation serves a purpose for him as well as for the earth. Michael’s speech that ends the opera encompasses all this in a few words:

. . . I have become man,
for one world day,
to live in ignorance,
only suspecting what an angel is,

a creator-angel,
 a deity,
 GOD of the universe—
 as child to come from a human mother's womb
 to grow, learn, strive,
 childlike to invent games with sounds,
 which even in their human form move the souls of angels:
 that is the meaning of THURSDAY from LIGHT.¹⁷

Fourth, Michael is Everyman (and Everywoman). This is my own interpretation, based on the fact that Stockhausen has used his own childhood as the model for Michael's. The unfriendly critic seizes on this as the composer's self-inflated identification with Christ. But it is more generous to interpret it in the context of the potential divinity of every human being, a doctrine common in esoteric sects. Christian Gnosticism, for example, teaches that we all have the divine spark, the Christ within us, which, if awakened by gnosis, enables us to return home.

The figure of Lucifer is equally complex. In one respect he is the rebel angel of Judeo-Christian mythology. In an interview of 1980, Stockhausen explained the motives of Lucifer's rebellion:

He wanted independence, self-government for the inhabited planets under him. His direct subordinate is Satan, whom one might call his first minister. So these two caused a rebellion in which most of the inhabited planets joined, and we are still living in this situation.

We experience on this planet every day what this rebellion wants and what its motive is: anti-hierarchy, self-direction, egalitarianism. And through it, the central linkage of our part of the universe is interrupted. No one knows any more how to get connected with other parts of the universe. We are cut off, we find ourselves on an island unconnected to other cosmic regions.

That, in brief, is the theme of *Licht*. (TM, 6:153)

It was statements in this vein that led to Stockhausen's vilification by the left-wing press and to his exclusion by the generally left-leaning artistic and media circles. In the climate of the Federal Republic, it was all too easy to tar this apolitical man with the brush of right-wing elitism.

Stockhausen's Lucifer myth takes further shape with these words from a conversation of 1982:

As the chief administrator of our system Satania, [Lucifer] did not approve of the experiment of creating humanity, for example by mixing beasts with angels (with regard to consciousness) and thus, as he says, making such “sick semi-beings,” imperfect bastards, who have to go through a process of becoming conscious in order to develop. Lucifer is simply against such processes because he knows that “the universe is a knowing, a meaning in harmony,” and he was simply against the process-idea of “ascent through death.” Michael set the process-plan in motion—he is the creator of our universe. Since Lucifer’s rebellion, Michael is directly responsible for the fate of our planet. (TM, 6:418)

Stockhausen’s Lucifer is a mocker of mankind and a despiser of Michael’s efforts on behalf of his creation, especially Michael’s own incarnation. Like many villains in drama, Lucifer is the chief source of humor in *Donnerstag*, to the extent that we cannot always take the cosmic war seriously. Michael, played variously by a tenor singer, by a boyish female dancer, and by a virtuoso trumpeter, has an air of the “knight in shining armor” that almost begs to be deflated. Lucifer, on the other hand, appears as a bass singer, a trombonist making grotesque noises, and a tap dancer. He is sleazy, cynical, and knowing. Stockhausen was well aware of the ambiguities of both characters. He writes in an early note for *Licht*: “Lucifer: freedom *from*; Michael: freedom *for* what?” (TM, 5:151)

The opera *Samstag* is a portrait of Lucifer, just as *Donnerstag* is a portrait of Michael and *Montag* of Eve. In the first of its four scenes, Lucifer sits in a chair while a pianist plays a long, phantasmagoric piece that is supposed to be his dream. Occasionally he sings, silencing the piano’s music. Stockhausen says that Lucifer “would basically prefer that the whole world could be so dissolved, so compromised, that its form might dissolve, because he is against the creation of banal forms. He would rather have everything raised to a more spiritual, much more lucid form” (TM, 6:417).

The second scene of *Samstag*, “Lucifer’s Requiem,” is wordless, being a long solo for flute with percussion accompaniment. At the time of composing this scene in 1981, Stockhausen must have become aware of certain teachings of Tibetan Tantrism, especially those of the Dzogchen school that were brought to Europe by Namkhai Norbu, Rinpoche.

Norbu's teachings emphasized the importance of recognizing the moment of "clear light" after death, which, if it can be entered, ensures freedom from involuntary rebirth. Stockhausen conceived "Lucifer's Requiem" as a practical aid for the departed soul. He suggests that it be played after a person's death for forty-nine days, or at least used to prepare oneself for the journey through the *bardo* (the after-death world) and the choices that await the soul there: either reincarnation, or extinction, or entry into the Clear Light" (TM, 6:556).

This has very little to do with the War in Heaven of *Donnerstag*. Indeed, *Samstag* has very little to do with opera, since the remaining scenes comprise "Lucifer's Dance" for large wind band and two dancers on stilts, which ends with the musicians pretending to go on strike; and a setting of Saint Francis's *Hymn to the Virtues* sung by a monkish choir. After embarking on *Licht*, Stockhausen still had to make his living by accepting commissions of many different kinds, and he made them all take their places as parts of one opera or another. Although every piece is thematically locked into the system of formulas that permeates the entire cycle, they could not have formed dramatically unified operas even if Stockhausen had wanted them to. As it is, his conception of opera resembles the tableaux of the Renaissance masque (complete with its Hermetic cosmology) more than the dramatic and climactic structures of the past two hundred years.

The third character, Eva or Eve, appears in two guises in act 1 of *Donnerstag*. First she is Michael's mother, played in triple form by a soprano singer, a basset-horn player, and a dancer. Then she is Mondeva, a bird-woman who provides Michael with his initiation into eroticism. It does not take a professional Freudian to see the sense in this, nor a Jungian to recognize Eve as the archetypal Anima. Eve's own opera is *Montag*, in which she appears as a gigantic sculpture of a woman, from whom a variety of creatures are born. The subject of *Montag*, in Stockhausen's words, is

new-birth, the new Christmas and the rebirth of humanity from Eve, who is responsible in our universe for the improvement of the human body. There is always the great problem of how a spirit can incarnate itself on various planets or stars. In order to evoke and direct spiritualization, you have to take on a body that can live there. And as body

you are always a child of that particular planet. So you must become a child of a particular planet in order to incarnate there. It is always a big decision to limit oneself so much. . . . You get a monkey skin, and have to transform it through angelic powers. Of course you never quite succeed, because it is so difficult. (TM, 6:199)

The Eve statue of *Montag* gives birth to two separate creations. The first consists of seven animal-headed beings and seven gnomes, who at the end of act 1 are all returned to her womb. The second birthing is of seven human boys (I don't know why they are all male) who correspond to the seven planets, seven days of the week, seven colors, etc. Then they are all led by a Pied Piper to a green heaven where children and birds are singing. This is the place to mention that the whole of *Licht* is permeated by the doctrine of signatures. Eve's color is green, and *Montag* is full of her element as water, steam, and ice. *Donnerstag*, with which we have most to do, is ruled by the planet Jupiter and dominated by Michael's colors: primarily blue, secondarily purple and violet. Stockhausen ensures that all his scores, opera libretti, and compact disks are issued in the appropriate colors.

In Gnostic terms, Stockhausen's Eve is Sophia, the mother and also the enlightener of humanity. Her two birthings recall those of the Valentinian myth, in which Sophia's first birthing is rejected as an abortion. Her story continues in *Freitag*, the opera of her seduction by Lucifer and the separation of the sexes; *Sonntag*, which celebrates her marriage to Michael; and *Mittwoch*, the day of Hermes the mediator, in which the three protagonists work out their relationships in conference.

The "God" whom Stockhausen occasionally mentions in his libretti and published texts is an undefined *deus absconditus*, who may be the focus of meditation or devotion but plays no part in his mythology. It is the impersonal Parabrahman of Vedanta and of certain rare mystics in the Abrahamic traditions. Perhaps it is the same as the Clear Light with which the Tantric initiate hopes to unite after death. In any case, while incarnated on earth we have to deal with deities of an inferior order and with the problems of being ourselves "Michaels" or spiritual beings temporarily inhabiting Eve's physical world.

The Lucifer-Michael pair, once detached from the moralistic *Urantia* cosmology, make a fascinating study in ambiguity. Seen from the view-

point of Gnosticism, both of them have aspects of the Demiurge. Michael is a creator-god in training. For him the whole difficult process of uniting and disuniting spirit and body, the wheel of birth and rebirth, has an inestimable value, and the experience of being a human being, flawed as he or she is, is worthwhile—even for a god like himself. One hopes that when he comes to create his own universe, he will do a good job of it.

For Lucifer, on the other hand, the whole affair is too messy and inharmonious. He would prefer creation to remain at the spiritual or imaginary level, where it can be summoned and dismissed at will like his own dream in *Samstag*. Because he refuses incarnation, Lucifer's appearances on earth are grotesque and even pitiable. He has not accepted the rules of the game, as Michael has, so he is always a misfit. Yet to the world-rejecting strain common to much of Gnosticism, Lucifer's plan might seem preferable to Michael's. If the dream of this "light-bearer" were realized, humanity would have been spared the bondage to matter and the miseries of physical existence.

Stockhausen certainly has had cause to sympathize with Lucifer's complaints. In 1978, when the project of *Licht* was first underway, he made some of his freest remarks in an interview with Jill Purce. He spoke there of the tremendous difficulty of getting things done on earth, where trivial jobs like carrying loudspeakers and setting up music stands can take five or six hours a day, and where so few of the inhabitants listen to his music. "It's all very primitive here," he says. In contrast, the main characteristic of Sirius is that:

[E]verything is music there, a living art of coordination and harmony of vibrations. Music in a very much higher sense than on this planet: a highly developed art, in which every composition arises in connection with the rhythms of Nature. An inner revelation has often shown me that I was educated on Sirius and have come here from Sirius. But usually people laugh at it and don't understand it, so there's not much sense in talking about it. (TM, 6:365)

I feel no urge to laugh. On the contrary, I find it admirable that a person as eminent as Stockhausen should hazard his reputation by saying such things, and have no reason to disbelieve him. What musician does not sympathize with his longing for a world freed from the conflicts and

density that make earthly music such a laborious and often imperfect affair?

Gnosticism comprises both a myth and a method, the latter being the gnosis or saving knowledge that is supposed to restore us to our spiritual nature. Stockhausen offers with his music nothing less than a Gnostic method, applicable at many levels according to the aspirant's ability. At the lowest level, which he does not at all despise, is the mere exposure to his music. He still speaks of the 1970 German Pavilion at the World's Fair in Osaka, Japan, as one of the high points of his life: his music was broadcast there for hours every day, so that it was heard by about a million visitors. Because of the way it is composed, he says that it has a beneficial effect on people even when their attention is not focused upon it. This reminds me of the Buddhist idea that merely to hear the Noble Truths of Buddhism, whether or not one believes or follows them, plants a seed that will spare one many lifetimes of unnecessary suffering.

At the other end of the hierarchy is the devotee who studies the intellectual construction of Stockhausen's music and then listens repeatedly to it, until it makes the same intuitive sense as most of us get from a piece by Mozart or Bach. To do this one has to cultivate a sensitivity to dynamics, timbres, overtones, and other aspects of sound that are usually taken for granted. In a class apart are the specialist performers, especially Stockhausen's companion Suzanne Stephens, who plays Eva's basset-horn in all the operas, and his son Markus who plays Michael as trumpeter. The difficulty of the roles created for them, and for that matter of nearly all Stockhausen's music, is so immense that to master it is to reach an almost superhuman refinement of the senses of hearing and of time. Without a doubt, such refinement affects the whole of a person's perception and life.

In my other contribution to this volume, "Music and the Hermetic Tradition," I concluded that the Hermetic path and the musical path are parallel ways to the same goal, and virtually exclusive of one another. Stockhausen and his musicians seem to me supreme examples of people committed to spiritual development and realization through music. It is alluring to speculate, along with the composer, about other worlds where such musicality is the normal mode of existence. In an infinite universe, there seems little doubt that such worlds must exist.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to the composer and to his companion, Suzanne Stephens, for giving me recordings, librettos, and copies of Stockhausen's writings.
2. K. Stockhausen, *Towards a Cosmic Music*, selected and translated by Tim Nevill (Shaftesbury, 1989), 87; original in Stockhausen's *Texte zur Musik, 1977–1984* (Cologne, 1989), 6:201. The latter will be referred to in the text as *TM*, followed by the volume and page numbers.
3. Michael Kurtz, *Stockhausen: a Biography* (London, 1992), 41.
4. *The Urantia Book* (Chicago, 1955).
5. Kurtz, *Stockhausen: a Biography*, 188, 196.
6. The anonymity of *Urantia's* receiver was penetrated by Martin Gardner. See Gardner's *On the Wild Side* (Buffalo, 1992), 103–8.
7. K. Stockhausen, *Donnerstag aus Licht* (London, 1985), unpaginated libretto, [5, 7].
8. *Ibid.*, [65].
9. *Urantia Book*, 234.
10. *Donnerstag*, [111].
11. *Ibid.*, [113].
12. *Urantia Book*, 559.
13. *Donnerstag*, [115].
14. *Urantia Book*, 604.
15. *Ibid.*, 239.
16. K. Stockhausen, "Sieben Tage aus LICHT," *Deutsches Aerzteblatt* 82, no. 37 (1985): 2.
17. *Donnerstag*, [135].