

Stockhausen – Gruppen & Punkte

Reviewed by: Timothy Ball

Stockhausen

Gruppen

Punkte [Printed version, 1994]

WDR Sinfonieorchester Köln

Arturo Tamayo / Péter Eötvös / Jacques Mercier [Gruppen]

Péter Eötvös [Punkte; assistant conductor Wolfgang Lischke]

Gruppen recorded on 28 May & 2 June 1997 at Messe Rheinlandsaal, Cologne; Punkte recorded on 8-9 June 2004 at the Philharmonie, Cologne

CD Number

BUDAPEST MUSIC CENTER BMC CD 117

Duration

51 minutes

Printer Friendly View

The name Karlheinz Stockhausen (born 1926) is almost synonymous – to some – with musical controversy. Certainly much of his work has been received less than enthusiastically and, in some cases, with derision. In many ways he has – unconsciously, no doubt – taken to heart Richard Wagner's monition: "Kinder, schaft neu" – children make something new – since every work from Stockhausen, one could argue, is a unique conception. He has always been concerned with the 'placing' of sound in the performance space and whilst one can find examples of positioning performers in different locations dating back to Monteverdi, the separation of a large orchestra – as in Gruppen – is, as far as I am aware, unprecedented.

109 players are divided into three, each with its own conductor. Sometimes the players and tempos converge, sometimes they don't. Sometimes they pass material to each other, often there is a sense of conflict. It is a remarkable work, all the more extraordinary when one reflects that this was Stockhausen's first score for such large forces, completed at the age of 28. The instrumental writing is assured and demands virtuoso performances from all the players.

The music is extremely well played on this excellent disc. Péter Eötvös who has been a close associate of Stockhausen's for many years. As a composer himself, Eötvös's insights are invaluable in the realisation of this complex work. Not having heard Gruppen for some time, I was struck by how much quiet music there is; stillness, tranquillity and silence are all present, though the score has acquired a certain notoriety for being noisy. It is certainly loud in places – ferociously so at some points – but these are offset by chamber-like scoring.

Stockhausen takes advantage of the range of instruments at his disposal, and often uses small groups of them. Certain instruments are prominent – the piano, whose formidable writing is splendidly rendered by a non-credited player, the electric guitar and the piccolo (E flat) clarinet, whose shrieks put one in mind of similar sounds in Webern's Six Pieces, Opus 6.

Richard Toop's excellent booklet note draws the links between Stockhausen and the Austro-Germanic tradition. Whilst the composer will be none-too-pleased about that, it is helpful to 'place' his work in context. But there is an underlying restlessness to Gruppen, heightened by constantly changing time-signatures (a debt to Stravinsky, surely) and a 'chromatic scale' of tempos.

Eötvös and his colleagues realise the score's requirements and there was clearly much detailed, even painstaking rehearsal involved. This last must, sadly, be one of the reasons why

Gruppen can probably never enter the 'mainstream' repertoire and, therefore, any performance or recording is bound to be a special event. The first performance was in March 1958 by the orchestra that was presumably the predecessors of the one on this disc, and on that occasion Stockhausen was one of the conductors and was joined by Pierre Boulez and Bruno Maderna.

In 1965, Stockhausen recorded the work with the same orchestra with Maderna and Michael Gielen. That recording is on Stockhausen-Verlag edition CD 5. It has a raw, nervous energy and authority, but the more recent sound on Budapest Music Center makes it easier to listen to. Incidentally, here is a work that is surely ideal for multi-channel listening. Perhaps BMC might make such a version available? A 1994 live performance with the Berlin Philharmonic and Claudio Abbado and colleagues was issued on Deutsche Grammophon; it is ruled out of contention by the simple fact that the composer disapproves of it. He was unhappy with the pitching of some of the drums, and considered the realisation of the tempos inadequate. I understand, in fact, that he felt unable to listen to the whole recording. Stockhausen aficionados will probably have the original.

This release with Eötvös has the advantage not only of first-rate sound, but also of being readily available. Stockhausen-Verlag CDs are only obtainable via mail-order. Stockhausen's own performance is coupled with the equally striking Carré for 4 orchestral and 4 choral groups. On this BMC release Eötvös conducts the first recording of Punkte and which includes all the composer's revisions made up until 1994, when a new edition was published.

It is a score that Stockhausen – uncharacteristically – has re-worked several times. In fact, the first version, dating from 1952 was withdrawn before its first performance. Major revisions followed in 1962 and again in 1964 and 1966. Thereafter amendments have been made, I assume whenever the work has been performed under the composer's direction thereafter. He considers the 1994 edition to be definitive.

Like Gruppen, this music is not really 'about' anything and like much of Stockhausen's work, it challenges our pre-conceived notions of what music is and how to listen. Unusually, it is virtually the only work by Stockhausen that is for a more-or-less 'standard' symphony orchestra, unadorned by any electronics. Perhaps the best way to approach Punkte is to simply listen to, and appreciate, the sounds for what they are. Virtually every note or chord has a different instrumental colouring and attack, articulation or dynamic – a source of fascination in itself.

Karlheinz Stockhausen's music has incredible rewards, but needs patience and, of course, good performances. It undoubtedly receives the latter on this highly recommendable release.

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