

# HOW TO ELABORATE AN INTERPRETATION OF STOCKHAUSEN'S *MIKROPHONIE I*

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## ABSTRACT

**Background.** Every musical performance is conditioned by the musical appropriation of a work by its performers, both physically and intellectually. But how conscious do the theoretical foundations have to be to come to a valuable performance? And where do the criteria for such an analysis come from: the composers writings, earlier performances, a previous practice of the performers?

Since 1998, I have taken part in performances of Stockhausen's live-electronic piece *Mikrophonie I* (1964). The goal was not to reproduce the moments-arrangement chosen by Stockhausen himself in the sixties, and so we had to come to a profound understanding of the formal strategies implied in this open-form-composition.

**Aim.** Since the indications in Stockhausen's score are both verbal and graphic, but do not refer to a common sign code, and since even a careful reading of the introductory notes to the score did not supply a sufficient framework to imagine an original interpretation, an analysis of an authentic preexisting reading of the rules – Stockhausen's own realisation – was indispensable to reconstruct/construct the significance of the rules in their most abstract form, which were then to become the foundations of a new version.

**Method.** The theoretical background concerning the "Momentform" –concept was explored to analyse *Mikrophonie I*. During the preparation of the performance, the goal consisted in producing the verbally determined sounds according to the precise rhythmic notation, to combine them polyphonically in the tutti-sections, and in choosing a specific moments-connections to realise a form-process which would respect the overall plan given by the composer (of which his own version is only one possible realisation).

**Results.** Different decisions taken during the working-process led to a version of *Mikrophonie I* first performed in Brussels on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1998 in a coproduction of the ensemble Hermes (Antwerp) and the Centre de Recherches et de Formation Musicales de Wallonie (Liège) that was clearly different from what listeners were used to hear as *Mikrophonie I*, but which nevertheless had these typical Stockhausen-features concerning timbre-preoccupation, time-articulation and formal gesture.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has had a look at both Stockhausen's score to *Mikrophonie I* and his introductory notes (which first served for the presentation of the work in the legendary "Musikalisches Nachtprogramm" broadcasted by the Cologne radio station WDR on December 9<sup>th</sup> 1965, and has later been published in *Melos* and reprinted in the third volume of the composer's *Texte*, published in 1971), has been confronted with the intriguing gap between a rather evident explanation and a notation which resists immediate understanding. Two reasons to this.

1. At first, the score consists of 44 pages assembled into 33 moments of different length. The notation is splitted into three layers, one for every performer of each of the two groups: a percussionist producing the sound on the tamtam, a microphonist capturing these sounds according to defined rules, and finally – placed somewhere in the concert hall – a filter-player modulating the captured sound before its transmission through four loudspeaker-groups in the concert hall. Furthermore, the rhythmic notation varies from traditional proportional notation to a space-notation with defined time-spans articulating the duration of a moment into specific sections. But most spectacular are the timber indications since beside typical percussion sounds ("hell wirbelnd", "dumpf trommelnd"), most of them relate to the external sonic worlds of animals, natural phenomena or engines.

2. Secondly, the score pages have to be arranged into a specific alternation of the two groups to result in a version of the composition. For this purpose, the score contains two form-schemes, one neutral (presenting simply the rules of connection), and a second with the so-called "Brussels-version" elaborated by Stockhausen and performed by his group from the middle of the sixties to the middle of the seventies. (By the way: the announced complete score of this Brussels-version has never been published, otherwise than the Paris-version of *Stimmung* for example). A first basically physical problem consists during the assemblage of the score-sheets in the fact that the moments do not simply follow one another, but that the temporal superposition varies in each case (since Stockhausen had planned several points of connection between the groups for each moment). The major difficulty lies nevertheless in the understanding of the logic of passage between the moments, i.e. the connection-problem. The rule presented in the score uses three different levels: the relation of the sounds nature in the successive moments (similar, different, opposite), the absolute behaviour between these sounds (supporting, neutral, destroying) and, finally, the progression of this latter in time, especially during the superposition of the moments (increasing, constant, decreasing). But what does signify a connection-rule like: "similar sounds supporting increasingly" (the first to be used in the score), since the score does not give any indication concerning the compositional aspect to which this rule has to be applied?

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

*Mikrophonie I*, progressing in composition during the autumn 1964 while the performers began to rehearse the already finished moments (see Davies, 1968, 8), is because of its external structure clearly a "Momentform"-composition. The notion of "Momentform", central for the understanding of Stockhausen's output of the sixties is worthwhile to be reconstructed historically. Stockhausen introduced the concept of "Momentform" in a radio-broadcast following the first performance of his composition *Kontakte*, associating electronic and instrumental sounds. While the composer considered his new work as the top of his output, the reactions after the performance were so diverse, that Stockhausen attempted to analyse the misunderstandings through a reflexion about musical time and presence. The central purpose of the by the way emerging theory of "Momentform" is the fact that the musical form of *Kontakte* consists in a succession of sections which are constantly at their very center, without any kind of preparation, progressive elaboration or elimination; between the sections do take place no transitional elements, one constantly present character changing suddenly into another one, also constantly present since the very beginning of the new section. For this reason – at least in Stockhausen's theoretical construction – a section never appears as the consequence of a former one or does contain indispensable elements for the understanding of the following one. Consequently, Stockhausen imagines that a listener could stop listening actively for a certain time (even leaving the concert hall for a while) and than entering the work (or the hall) again without any danger of having lost the contact with the music. This position is strictly oriented towards the perception of music and does not reveal Stockhausen's compositional purpose while working on *Kontakte*, since the work is founded on an overall plan describing a continuous timbral transformation. In *Momente* (of which a first version was given in 1962 while the completion of the composition took Stockhausen several years resulting in a first performance of the complete version in 1972), this perception theory has been transformed into a compositional purpose. The idea of "self-centred" musical sections – now properly named "Momente" – results in a constellation of both independent and interwoven situations: their structural relations are organised through proportional repartitions of three multiparametric characters. This constellation is arranged according to a genealogical tree with up to four successive generations of derivation. The actual link between the moments in a performance depends on the specific reading of the connection rules defined by the composer, different possibilities of exchange between moments or moment-groups existing on various levels. The only constancy from one version of *Momente* to another is the "intervall of generations" between succeeding moments, a specific application of the notion of "Veränderungsgrad" (degree of change), crucial both in Stockhausen's "Momentform" theory and as compositional criteria since *Kontakte* and *Zyklus*. (There are also large excerpts of Stockhausen's 1959 seminar in Darmstadt on "Musik und Graphik" which are concerned with this problem.)

## 3. ANALYSIS OF STOCKHAUSEN'S "BRUSSELS-VERSION"

In Stockhausen's Brussels-version, the opening QUAKEND is followed by KNISTERND-GACKERND. The connection that has to be actualised is: "similar sounds supporting increasingly". A first level of similarity is implied by the proximity of the living worlds of frogs and ducks. The aspect wherein this relation does seem to me to have been realised in the most perceptible way from the point of view of musical composition is the rhythmic structuration. QUAKEND is characterised by groups of two impulses, the second being stressed by an accent. The separation of the groups implies furthermore a longer interval of entrance between the second impulse of a group to the beginning of the next group than between the two impulses forming a group. One can thus deduce for the group itself a duration relation of short-long. In KNISTERND-GACKERND, the rhythm of GACKERND undergoes a progressive transformation, starting with a pattern 2+1+2+1, changing onto a regular alternation of soft and strong sounds (approaching by this way already the initial QUAKEND-character) and finally a clearly short-long pattern appearing in different versions (eighth-note – eighth-note tied to a half-note; eighth-note – dotted quarter; sixteenth-note – dotted eighth-note) before evolving to even more complex figures. Stockhausen has chosen for his interpretation to let the first group go on with playing QUAKEND until the second group has reached the short-long pattern, so that the relation between the two characters from the point of view of similar timbres coming closer and closer one to another has become obvious before shifting to the next relation in the form-scheme. From KNISTERND-GACKERND to WINSELND-JAULEND, the relation has to be decreasingly supporting with similar sounds. The connection stresses the melodic shape of two falling glissandi followed by a down-up glissandi in KNISTERND-GACKERND, followed in WINSELND-JAULEND by a rhythmic figure always ending in a long dog's whining shaped as quick ascending glissando followed by various descending curves.

## 4. THE NEW VERSION

During the oral presentation, excerpts of the new version will illustrate the latitude of the rules deduced through analysis to create a new interpretation of *Mikrophonie I*.

## 5. REFERENCES

1. Davies, H. (1968), Working with Stockhausen, *Composer* 27 (1968) 8-11.
2. Stockhausen, K. (1971), *Texte zur Musik 1963-1970*, Cologne: DuMont, 58-62.