

The Importance of Stockhausen's 'INORI'

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On Wednesday 23 October 1974 an event of outstanding artistic importance took place at the London Coliseum: the first English performance of Stockhausen's latest work, *Inori*, subtitled 'Adorations for Soloist and Orchestra'. The soloist on this occasion was a mime, the extraordinary Elisabeth Clarke, and I am not sure whether the work should be looked at from the point of view of music, of mime, of ballet or of theatre. Its importance, I think, lies in the fact that it forces us to re-think all these categories and the barriers we normally erect between them. Musicians will no doubt soon be commenting in detail on the score. Here I only want to make a few tentative suggestions about the nature of the total experience.

Stockhausen's work has always been intensely dramatic; even the most abstract works have sprung from a strong sense of the conflict or dialogue of sounds or instruments. In some cases the players have had, at key moments in the score, to break out into shouts or grunts which remind one of nothing so much as the sounds made by animals as they stalk and circle each other, whether in game or earnest. He has even, in *Momente*, given us a huge semi-dramatic work. But *Inori* is the first piece in which he has introduced a figure on the stage whose function is not primarily to make music. And since with Stockhausen, as with Stravinsky, each new work is not only a logical extension of all that has come before, but also a radically new departure, and since each such departure has a meaning not just for music but for all the arts, it is worth trying to understand the function and importance of the mime in *Inori*.

To make sense of a photograph it is sometimes helpful to hold up the negative to the light. In trying to understand the role of gesture in *Inori* it may be more helpful to focus on the often ludicrous and aggressively meaningless gestures of the heroes of Kafka or Beckett than on the hieratic gestures for which Keats longed and which are exemplified in the arts of Japan, or to consider the theories of Le Coq or Martha Graham. There is, for example, an extraordinary letter written by Kafka to Max Brod in the first year of their friendship, 1904, which sheds a great deal of light on our subject. 'It is very easy to be cheerful at the start of the summer,' Kafka begins. 'One has a light heart, an easy step, a taste for what is to come... This season, which has only a beginning and no ending, plunges us into a state so strange and yet so natural that it might well kill us. We are literally carried along by a wind that blows where it will, and nothing stops us from being a little cross when, caught in a draught, we clutch our foreheads or try to calm ourselves by speaking certain words, the tips of our narrow fingers pressed hard against our knees... As I was opening my eyes after a short siesta, still rather uncertain of my existence, I heard my mother ask from the balcony, in a perfectly natural tone: "What are you doing?" A woman replied from the garden: "I am revelling in the grass." And I was amazed at the assurance with which people know how to live their lives...'

At the start of this letter there is a latent anguish at the openendedness of the summer: there is too much time, there are too many possible ac-

tions to be undertaken, gestures to be made, words to be written. And this plethora of possibilities renders ludicrous whatever one actually does do. From the focus on gesture Kafka goes on, in a terrifying passage I have omitted, to meditate on moles, implicitly identifying himself with those little animals who, in their burrows, have only one direction in which to go and no room at all for superfluous gesture - yet who also live in such anguish and insecurity. Out of this passage emerges the overheard exchange between his mother and the lady in the garden, a scene which made such an impression on Kafka that he included it verbatim in his first published story, 'Description of a Struggle'. What the exchange reveals to Kafka is that for other people living seems to be a perfectly natural activity. But not for him. Not only his actions but even his smallest gestures appear redundant, and when he settles down to write, feeling that this activity will at last give meaning to his life, he discovers that words are as arbitrary as gestures: if the writer is free to use any words then how is he to decide which to choose?

Artistically, Kafka's dilemma is the same as Cézanne's or Schoenberg's: how to find rules which will allow their artistic language to escape from the personal and arbitrary. And though Schoenberg, as is well known, found a solution to the problem of musical language, neither he nor Berg ever solved the problem of the relation of this musical language to dramatic language, when they came to write works for the stage. The music of *Wozzeck* or of *Moses and Aaron* may be as strict as anything they ever wrote, but in terms of drama and staging they do not differ essentially from *Tosca* or *Elektra*.

This may at first sight appear to be a non-sensical statement, so it is worth going into the question a little more fully. If we take the broad sweep of drama, opera and ballet, there appear to be three alternatives open to writer/director/choreographer. First, the work can be 'realistic', the gestures employed by the people on the stage finding their justification by reference to the gestures we see people making all round us all the time. This is where Kafka can help us. For Kafka the context of gesture has gone; he sees the world around him as if it was framed on a stage. The world seems to be a play into which he has wandered, and whose author and plot he does not and cannot know. Now gestures are normally related to specific actions, such as running for a bus, lifting food to the mouth, and so on. In Kafka we are made aware of the fact that people act as though their lives at large were given meaning by projects in the same way, when in fact that is not the case. At the same time he draws attention to the fact that in a play a person does not really make a certain gesture in order to bring about a certain end, but only so as to maintain the illusion of reality. People on a stage do not act the way they do because that is somehow inherent in the material, 'natural', but because they want to suggest to an audience ordinary people going about ordinary lives. And their gestures are in fact determined for them by the director's sense of what will look natural. Ultimately these ges-

tures, like the words they speak if they are taking part in a play, will be the product of choices made by the author and the director, and will be heavily dependent on the prevailing ideology. But this uneasy mixture is precisely what a composer like Schoenberg wanted to escape from. In his case he wrote an opera which solved the problem in a typically modern and desperate way: it enacted a condemnation of the very form in which that condemnation was uttered.

Secondly, the work can be stylised so as to remove it from the arbitrary nature of the everyday and suggest its own status as art. This is what one finds in most ballet and in Mozartian opera. But there is also another kind of stylisation, which one might call mythification, or the attempt to raise the action to the status of myth, and therefore, of necessity. This was Wagner's way, which Nietzsche at first applauded as the way back to the truly meaningful drama of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and then condemned as a fraud, the attempt to impose an ersatz religion on audiences hungry for certainty. In attending a Wagner opera one is immediately aware of the composer's will, coercing one into submission. This is part of the experience, to which we may react with pleasure or with revulsion, depending on our temperament, but which we cannot deny. The reason for this is that Wagner presents us with what he insists is 'the world', 'the Truth', as opposed to the frivolous spectacles of a Puccini or a Verdi. But in reality Wagner's opera is just as much the product of an ideology as is theirs. At every stage decisions are made about gesture, lighting, movement, and so on, just as with every new production decisions have to be made about the sets. All these piecemeal decisions ('a master of miniature' Nietzsche called Wagner) are precisely what a composer like Schoenberg wanted to get away from. How he did so is part of the history of modern music. Unfortunately the lessons to be derived from Wagner's grandiose attempt to enforce a private vision as the Truth have not been learned, as a work like Henze's *The Bassarids* (also recently seen at the Coliseum, and hailed by many who should know better as the most important musico-dramatic work of the post-war years) shows only too clearly. Not all the cunning of the librettists, Auden and Kallman, and of the composer himself, can hide the fact that the dramatisation of the conflict between Apollo and Dionysus is something very different from the reconciliation of the two in the very conception of the work. In Euripides, as in Henze, the clash of reason and sensuality is the product of a false dualism, imposed by reason itself. When this is presented on the stage it strikes the viewer as a mixture of titillation and sentimentality more reminiscent of Strauss than of Aeschylus.

The third possibility, total abstraction, cannot be found in opera or drama, since both use words, but only in ballet. Here too, however, the movement of the dancers remains arbitrary, subject only to the multiple decisions of the choreographer.

What we see in all three kinds of stage work (and many of course combine what I have separated out for convenience) is a condition of false transcendence. At each stage the work could clearly be other than it is; it is only what it is because someone has decided that this is how it will be. But of course as it stands the work suggests that it can only be what it is and not other - that it is as it is through some divine sanction. In *Inori* Stockhausen by-passes all three approaches. The work is not realistic, it is not mythical, and it is not abstract in the sense in which modern dance is often abstract. What then is it? In his programme note Stockhausen has explained the underlying structure of the work and it is worth quoting him at some length. 'The whole work,' he writes, 'is developed from an URGESTALT (primal shape) or even formula, which was composed first of all. It has 13 different pitches, plus 2 repeated at its end. The 13 pitches are associated with 13 tempi, 13 dynamic levels, 13 timbres, and 13 gestures of prayer (plus 2 final gestures).' This primal shape, which has five parts, lasts for about a minute. It is then projected onto a scale of about an hour, the duration of the piece. By projection, Stockhausen is careful to say, he does not mean development; rather, we must think of those exercises in elementary topology in which a piece of rubber is stretched until it covers a far larger area than it originally did, but remains the same piece of rubber. All this, so far, is very close to the compositional procedures of *Mantra*, Stockhausen's recent piece for two pianos and electronic modulation. What is new is the presence of the mime. 'The gestures of prayer,' the composer goes on, 'are performed absolutely in synchronisation with the orchestra by a person raised on a podium in the middle of the orchestra. A gesture performed with clasped hands in the region of the heart, close to one's chest, corresponds to the pitch middle G, pianissimo, and with the longest duration. When this gesture is made in a forward direction, away from the body, this corresponds to a crescendo from pianissimo, to be graduated in 60 levels. When the hands are raised or lowered, this corresponds to an alteration of pitch, and the vertical alterations of the gestures of prayer become a sort of chromatic scale of pitches distributed over 3 octaves... The different gestures of prayer are used like timbres and tempi.'

What Stockhausen has done in effect is to create the choreography as he creates the music. What the viewer experiences may at first seem rather like a form of Indian dance: thousands of highly stylised gestures, learned and mastered, each for an appropriate occasion. But Indian dance is the product of a long tradition: the dancer learns the repertory of gesture in his youth and the relation of each gesture to the tale it helps tell is laid down by tradition. To try and transplant this to Western Europe would only be a form of dilettantism and mystification. *Inori* is indeed, as the composer insists, a mystical work, but only because there is absolutely no mystification. The work stems neither from a source in the past outside

