

The Irrelevance of the Avant-Garde

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In the normal course of events, the world is content to ignore the capers that take place in our ivory-tower institutions. But in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, the public has suddenly cast a sharp eye on obscure academic figures whose reactions demonstrate either an appalling callousness, an extreme removal from reality, or both. One figure in the latter category is Karlheinz Stockhausen, a German composer considered a modern master among contemporary academic composers—and ignored by the rest of the world.

The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's English edition carries the following account of Stockhausen's comments, by reporter Julia Spinola:

Asked at a press conference on Monday for his view of the events, Stockhausen answered that the attacks were "the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos. . . . Minds achieving something in an act that we couldn't even dream of in music, people rehearsing like mad for ten years, preparing fanatically for a concert, and then dying, just imagine what happened there. You have people who are that focused on a performance and then five thousand people are dispatched into the afterlife, in a single moment. I couldn't do that. By comparison, we composers are nothing."

In the wake of widespread condemnation—including a cancellation of a four-concert celebration of his music in Hamburg, and an unprecedented censure by the Berlin Academy of the Arts—Stockhausen attempted an explanation even stranger than his original comment. He claimed that he had been speaking in the context of characters that have been central to his hyper-esoteric recent compositional output, including his planned twenty-eight-hour work "Light." This explanation reads, in part: "At the press conference in Hamburg, I was asked if Michael, Eve, and Lucifer were historical figures of the past and I answered that they exist now, for example Lucifer in New York. . . . I said that [the events] appeared to be Lucifer's greatest work of art. . . . I cannot find a fitting name for such a 'satanic composition.'" Unfortunately for Stockhausen, the conversation was recorded by one reporter and has been rebroadcast countless times, giving the lie to Stockhausen's spin. Nothing daunted, an acolyte declared that the reporter was, with amazing prescience, constantly pushing and releasing the pause button to get just the right snippets of conversation out of context.

For those who are wondering how classical music came to this, we can look first to Arnold Schoenberg, the early twentieth-century composer who argued that our traditional harmonic system, cultivated over centuries and producing many of our civilization's greatest treasures, had run its course and an entirely new organizing principle was needed. (He offered his own as the answer.) Schoenberg's creed was augmented by the French composer Pierre Boulez, who argued that, having done away with traditional harmony, it made no sense to retain traditional melodic or formal structures either.

Many of our finest composers dissented quietly, went their own ways, and produced beautiful bodies of work. But the Schoenberg-Boulez line was held up as historically inevitable progress, and suddenly composers who wanted to be hip and part of history were left scrambling for their own 'new' way of writing music. From the screeching bleeps of Penderecki's "Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima" to Cage's "4'33" (where the pianist shuts the piano and lets the audience's incidental

noise make the "music"), piece after piece emerged that showed little craft and achieved validation only through attaching itself to some artistically "progressive" or politically correct concept.

Here is where Stockhausen earned his fame and even became hip enough to end up on the cover of the Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper" album. He contributed heavily to the avant-garde scene with pieces (among countless others) in which the performer simply lets his eye rove among various isolated chunks of score and plays what he sees for a fixed amount of time—plus loads of 'experimental electronic' music that at the time was hailed for being spooky and futuristic but now could be outdone by any teenager with a computer and a sampler. In the end, we had the spectacle in the 1970s of an "avant-garde" music circle that simply dragged to a halt and remains there today, frozen in time, a purgatory in which Stockhausen himself is stuck, while classical composition on the whole has taken a dramatic turn toward conservatism, accessibility, and meaning. Flailing for attention, the avant-gardists produce works that are designed to "send vibrations of welcome to extraterrestrial beings from different galaxies and universes," according to critic Paul Moor, and a string quartet for four helicopters.

It's hard to see how any of these ivory-tower composers are capable of contributing meaningfully to our experience of the post-September 11 world. The Hungarian composer Gyorgy Ligeti said, in response to Stockhausen's comments, that he should be confined to a mental institution. But can anyone who knows Ligeti's music think a work in his style could produce something that speaks to this tragedy? Or, for that matter, could works by any of our compositional elder statesmen: Elliott Carter, Pierre Boulez, Iannis Xenakis, Milton Babbitt, Luciano Berio? Each of their crowning achievement was to come up with a style that was original in some sort of entirely cerebral way. Consequently, like economists' models that ignore how living people act, their music does none of the things that we look to music to do.