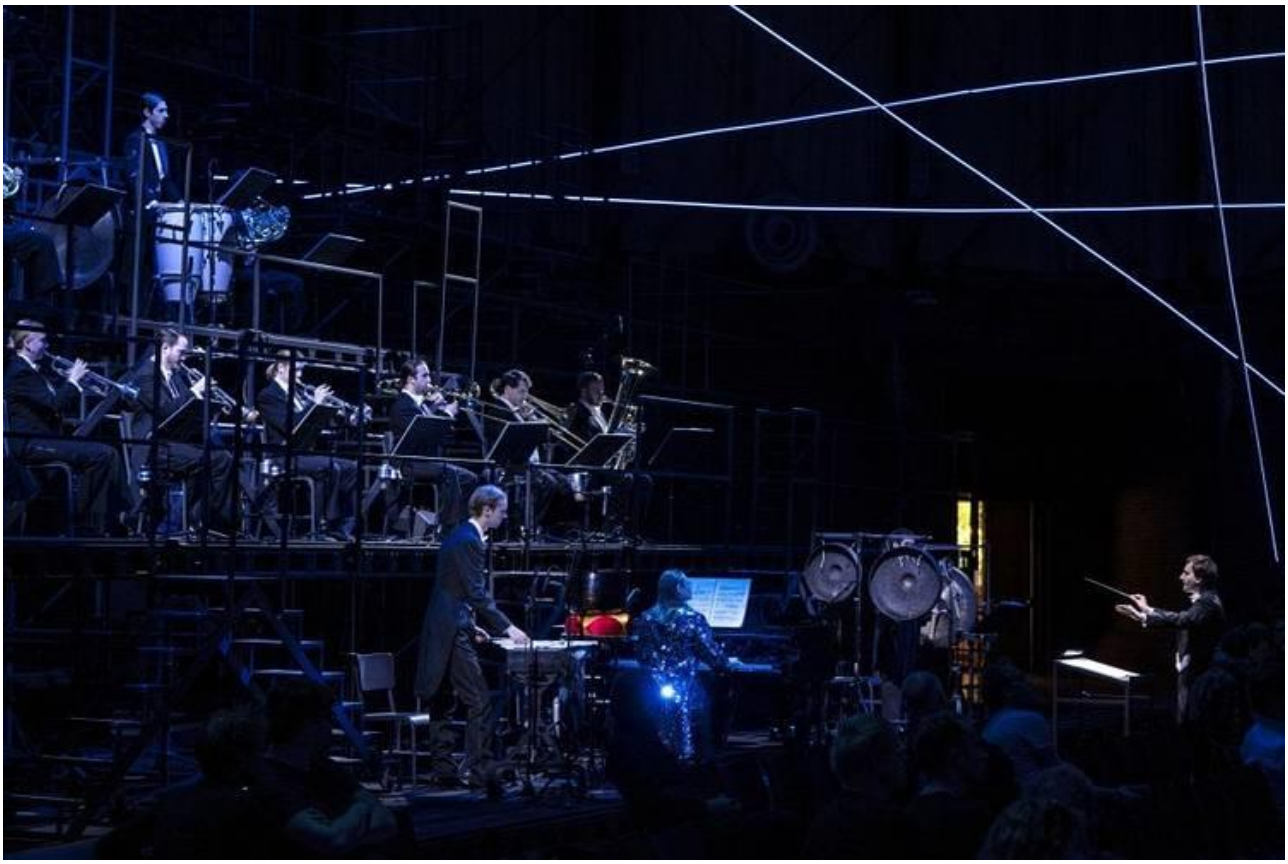
‘Aus LICHT’ Review: A Kaleidoscopic Production

At the Holland Festival, a survey of radical musical innovator Karlheinz Stockhausen’s seven-opera cycle, complete with helicopter-borne string quartet.



Selections of Karlheinz Stockhausen’s seven-opera ‘Licht’ were presented in ‘aus LICHT’ PHOTO: RUTH & MARTIN WALZ

By
A.J. Goldmann
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When the single most comprehensive survey of Karlheinz Stockhausen’s seven-opera “Licht” (“Light”) cycle was announced as the centerpiece of this year’s Holland Festival, the news sent tremors of excitement through the music world.

The influential German composer (1928-2007) was a tireless innovator, constantly striking out in new directions by embracing avant-garde musical systems, including serialism and chance, drawing inspiration from non-Western musical traditions and pioneering highly complex, multichannel electronic music. It was this last aspect of his work, which inspired rock musicians in the 1960s, that made Stockhausen one of the very few figures in contemporary classical music who was also a household name. But it was the epic "Licht"—a 29-hour-long cycle of seven operas named for the days of the week that he worked on between 1977 and 2003—that cemented Stockhausen's reputation as the personification of modern music's most outlandish and esoteric tendencies.

Unlike Wagner's "Ring," its closest competition in terms of scope, "Licht" is a circular creation. Taking as his theme the cosmic drama of genesis, destruction and regeneration, the composer fashioned a work with no precise start or end point. As he progressed, he increasingly turned his back on plot in favor of a ritualistic treatment of the grand themes embodied by the archangel Michael, Eve and Lucifer, presented as archetypes rather than three-dimensional characters.

Starting with the premiere of "Donnerstag" in 1981 at Milan's La Scala, each opera has been performed individually, although productions are extremely rare. In the decade since the composer's death, the mystique of "Licht" has only grown, which helps explain why the Holland Festival's "aus LICHT" (the "aus" means "from" in German), a co-production together with the Dutch National Opera, the Royal Conservatory of The Hague and the Stockhausen Foundation for Music, was so eagerly awaited.

As details were announced, the anticipation only mounted. Yes, "aus LICHT" would feature the "Helicopter String Quartet," where four musicians, true to the piece's title, perform while airborne. (The audience watches a live video feed.) To help train enough musicians, the conservatory established a special master's program. Kathinka Pasveer, Stockhausen's collaborator and muse, served as musical director, ensuring maximum fidelity to the composer's wishes.

Stockhausen has a reputation for being an unapproachable high priest of the avant-garde, and "Licht" has been considered his ultimate folly. Somewhat miraculously, "aus LICHT"

managed to contradict both views. Its 15 hours, spaced over three days, never seemed like an endurance test.

No doubt about it—this is intense stuff. But it was hardly the freak-out that one might imagine. In context, the "Helicopter String Quartet" was only one highlight of many. It's a gimmick, to be sure, but what a gimmick! The all-female Pelargos Quartet, made up of conservatory students, played this devilishly difficult music with virtuosic aplomb. They were among the roughly 600 performers and technicians—in addition to orchestras, choruses and synthesizers, there are numerous soloists for flute, basset horn, trumpet and piccolo—who ensured that the other 14 scenes were equally as thrilling.

Day One ushered us into the cycle with an abridged version of "Donnerstag," the first and in some ways most conventional installment. A high point here was "Michael's Journey Around the Earth," a riotous instrumental travelogue featuring a pair of cheeky clarinetists who cavort with Marx Bothers-like dexterity.

The "Journey" also gave the first indication of the cycle's pervasive and unexpected humor, which runs the gamut from slapstick silliness to high camp (an extended solo for a mad synthesizer player, aptly named Synthi-Fou, looks and sounds like a glam-rock version of "Phantom of the Opera") to the comic grotesquerie of "Lucifer's Dance," where the fallen angel conjures an orchestra in the form of a gigantic face and compels the individual features—eyebrows, chin and so on—to dance infernally.

Stockhausen assigned his three protagonists a brief musical "formula," reminiscent of Wagner's leitmotifs, which he used as a versatile scaffolding on which to hang fluidly shifting layers of vocal, instrumental and electronic music. It doesn't look or sound like a conventional opera (the mood is often closer to a ritual or a meditation), but neither is it full of astringent, abrasive sounds. On the contrary, the vocal and instrumental roles require a great deal of technical brilliance and beauty to pull off. Stockhausen also specified gestures for the singers and musicians down to the minutest detail. On the page, these indications can seem quite bonkers, but they make surprisingly good sense on stage. Pierre Audi, the Dutch National Opera's recently departed director, oversaw a kaleidoscopic production with many moving parts. He devised a holistic and flexible presentation for this

epic cycle inside the Gashouder Westergasfabriek, a former gasometer that was an appropriately vast setting for this gargantuan work.

The circular space was ringed with highly focused floodlights and with tubes of fluorescent light that changed colors hypnotically. With massive scaffolding, incredible sound design and frequently trippy film projections that combined live broadcasts with video art, Mr. Audi and his team crafted an industrial design in which it was easy to lose oneself.

Stockhausen's wide-ranging score envelops the audience in amplified live music and electronic tracks. Musicians and singers often fanned out across the theater (the seating was open and chairs were often rearranged between scenes), from the "Saturday Greeting," an omnidirectional fanfare for brass and percussion, all the way through to the rapturous "Angel Processions" chorus from "Sonntag" (the final opera, which premiered in 2011), which concluded the epic production on a note of poignant simplicity.

Arguably the most gripping moment of immersive theater was the "Invasion-Explosion With Farewell" from "Dienstag," the battle between Michael and Lucifer, whose troops dart through the audience armed with angelic trumpets and demonic trombones.

One of the production's most impressive feats was how it turned the spectator into a full-fledged participant. The mood was neither somber nor worshipful, but alive and engrossing. It felt like an adrenaline rush; which is why, I imagine, the exhaustion only set in the morning after.

Above and beyond Stockhausen's celestial ambitions, the production succeeded in realizing profoundly human ones through a tangible degree of love and dedication. "Aus LICHT" was many things, but it was never pretentious or elitist. This monumental survey of Stockhausen's magnum opus succeeded in demystifying his near-mythic creation, while making a compelling case for "Licht" as a work of universal artistic merit.

Mr. Goldmann writes about international arts and culture.