

# contact

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Some thoughts on Contemporary Piano Music  
prompted by two recent recitals

In the space of four days I had the unique opportunity of hearing the major piano works of the two most important single figures of the avant-garde in music today. On November 7th I heard Aloys Kontarsky play the complete piano pieces of Stockhausen (in London, alas, not in Birmingham). And on the following Wednesday the young American-born pianist Richard Berman played Cage's Sonatas and Interludes for prepared piano, preceded by two short works by Graham Hearn and Richard Orton, in a recital at the Barber Institute.

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It is significant that these piano works, both of considerable importance in the history of 20th century music, were written in their respective composers' earlier years: Sonatas and Interludes in 1946-48 and Stockhausen's Klavierstucke mainly during the early fifties. That is, during the period when both composers were writing totally determined and chiefly conventionally notated music. Since then, of course, both have "gone indeterminate", although it is perhaps not generally realised that they have since returned to fully-notated compositions.

May we therefore expect further solo piano works from these composers along similar lines to their earlier works? Stockhausen's eleven piano pieces were, after all, originally conceived as part of a projected set of twenty-one, abandoned after the composer's difficulties in completing IX and X and his desertion of total serialism per se. However, I see the possible new works as being radically different from the earlier ones, and by no means simply a return to earlier techniques and practices, I think both composers will find unadorned use of the keyboard too limiting for their expressive needs - although I hope I may be proved wrong. Both composers are too strongly creative musicians to sink to the naive twangings and thumpings of the inside of the piano which characterise so much contemporary piano music - but then genius has a way of using hackneyed and even unpromising material in new ways.

Cornelius.

Just up at the "Swan"

[L.H. side at top of road] having  
a brief drink. Come up and  
have one and feel reinforced  
for the rehearsal!

John.

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The use of electronic manipulation holds out more promise, I think, although Stockhausen's recent "Mantra" for two pianos is a disappointing work - due partly to its strange lack of resource and variety in the use of electronic manipulation of piano sound. (Ring modulators by themselves become boring after a surprisingly short time.) The promised mesmeric effect of this work just was not achieved as far as I was concerned; thus the above criticism would seem to hold good.

Contemporary piano music, to put it bluntly, needs a good kick in the pants and a composer of exceptional talent to take stock of the problems - limitations, implied conventions and all - and create something really startling (and probably quite simple in its basic idea when we all get to thinking about it). After all, the 1960's was probably the first decade in the history of the piano in which no work of any lasting significance was written for it as a solo instrument.

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That new music for the piano is not completely dead was, however, proved by the inclusion of the pieces by Hearn and Orton in Richard Bernas' Birmingham recital. The former's Piano Piece II, a musical graphic score, can be played in many different ways. Mr. Bernas chose to play it softly and serenely and revealed his very personal identification with the piece, which, like the Orton, was written for him. Orton's "Pièce de Résistance" was a magical exploration of simple and occasionally chromatically altered chords and melodic fragments in a very tonal F major, in which each chord progression, each crescendo and diminuendo, was crucial and sometimes devastating - an exploration of subtle nuances and the gradual evolution from a static state which characterises much of the New Music.

KEITH POTTER