

contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Bracefield, Hilary. 1983. 'Groping Towards *Gruppen*'. *Contact*, 27. pp. 49-50. ISSN 0308-5066.

Hilary Bracefield

Groping towards 'Gruppen'

Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Gruppen*; London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Claudio Abbado, Edward Downes, and James Judd, Barbican Centre, London, 28, 29, 31 March 1983

It seems on the surface ridiculous that in 1983 the performance by a major orchestra in a major musical centre of a major work from the 1950s by a major 20th-century composer is so rare that it is made something of a red-letter occasion, but there it is. A work requiring forces no larger than those for *The Rite of Spring* or a Strauss tone poem, with a not unmanageable degree of spatial separation between groups—which an orchestra would cope with cheerfully for the Berlioz *Requiem* or a full-dress production of the *1812 Overture*—is tentatively given its sixth performance in Great Britain, heralded by much preparatory publicity of a gingerly nature, and greeted by a positive swarm of critics from all over the place, a sprinkling of lionising socialites, diffident reviews, and a mention in *Private Eye* (not in Pseud's Corner)—to be rewarded, in all likelihood, by suppression from the orchestra's repertory for as long as possible.

I speak, of course, of the open lecture-concert and two performances of Stockhausen's *Gruppen*, given in the Barbican in the last week of March by the LSO conducted by Claudio Abbado, Edward Downes, and James Judd. There was much about the aura surrounding the whole operation that smacked of the still-prevalent need to put avant-garde works into some special category. It was marketed as a big contemporary event yet the programme was shared uneasily with two works by Brahms—*Variations on a Theme by Haydn* and the *Alto Rhapsody*—presumably to bring in a big-name draw, Shirley Verrett. It was hard to tell how many of the audience did in fact appear for only one half of the programme, but there were many who sat through the Stockhausen with fixed, forbearing smiles on their faces.

Now it is true that there is still much music by many earlier 20th-century masters that is only rarely granted an airing by the main London concert givers. But by now important works of the 1950s and 1960s should be receiving stern assessment from the standpoint of full understanding fostered by the availability of regular live realisations. This is certainly not happening with Stockhausen's work in Britain at present. The sheer excitement of the performances we had in the late sixties and early seventies seems to have gone. Those sometimes forbidding concerts, directed by the composer beadily keeping everyone to the straight and narrow, which brought each new work to this country, seem to have ended. For most of us the 25-year-old *Gruppen* is known chiefly from the recording, the score, the commentaries, and Stockhausen's own pronouncements; if we stretch our memories back some of us may have recollections of one of the few performances—the last in Britain was in 1976. Our knowledge of the work's structures comes to us not from familiarity with the live music, but only from the written word, our aural impression not from hearing it in the kind of space it was designed for, but from the two-dimensional sound of a recording.

Having attended on all three evenings at the Barbican (I also heard the 1974 Prom at which the work was played), I still don't feel I can decide how

good *Gruppen* is, and the chief barrier to my decision is the kind of treatment it received. Perhaps it was unfortunate that I was there on Monday night. Only after the evening was over did I notice that the programme called it a lecture-concert; I had expected a final rehearsal, but in fact after the lecture the piece was played right through once. Jonathan Harvey's introduction, illustrated by excerpts played by the LSO, struck the right balance between enthusiasm and erudition and gave very suitable information for the general audience. But I was far more shocked than the London critics seem to have been by the behaviour of the musicians in front of the paying public. Deliberate guffawing at places where Jonathan Harvey spoke of the strong fascination of the work the more one hears it, and of the influence on the score of the shapes of the mountains of Switzerland where Stockhausen was working, was disturbing and could not help but colour the attitude of the audience. A lot of silly waving from orchestra to orchestra, inattention and noise during the lecture, and the rude packing up of instruments the moment the chief conductor laid down his baton at the end of the play-through left the impression that the LSO was playing the work under duress, as a duty. All this affected my reception of the performances on the next two nights, and my judgment of the work.

There was no doubt, though, that uncommitted as many of the instrumentalists may have been, committed the conductors certainly were. And there was no doubt that the work had been thoroughly prepared. The performances were in general remarkably accurate in timing and dynamics and in the synchronisation between the three orchestral groups. Abbado, Downes, and Judd really knew the music, and the players could certainly play what was on the pages in front of them—no mean feat at all. But despite the fact that Stockhausen appears to have pre-programmed all the elements in the piece, like any composer relying on live performance he cannot avoid the chance element which is its greatest trait. These three renderings of *Gruppen* had an inflexibility that came from two sources. First there was the fact that the orchestra didn't really know the piece—this is surely the main barrier to proper assessment of so many 20th-century works: players concentrating on getting the notes right can't listen to the whole piece as it unfolds. Second, the players seemed unable or unwilling to relax into the music and enjoy it (from the attitude at the lecture-concert I guess that this was because many of them felt antipathy for it).

As regards note-playing, the three performances were, in fact, remarkably similar. The opening sections were assured on the first night after the warm-up of playing excerpts to illustrate the lecture, but the rest of the performance came across very much as a run-through. Tuesday night started much more tentatively from cold, but built to the big climax at group 114 with far greater excitement. On Thursday many of the solo passages sounded more individual and lyrical, and the string sections of the orchestras seemed more sure of their place in the work and assertive in their playing, but the climax made less impact. The broadcast performance (Tuesday night) was appreciably shorter than the well-known recorded performance, some of the acceleration of tempo coming around group 40, and more resulting from the excited antics of the conductors at groups 76 and 118. There were several sections, for example some of the early parts of the work around groups 9 and 14, and the trilled music starting in group 113 in orchestra 3, where one felt that the orchestras had misunderstood Stockhausen's intentions regarding balance. There were sections, too, where nice effects, evident on the page

and in the recording, did not come off: the pointillistic sounds of group 22, the big brass chords of 118, the drums at 121, and worst of all the flat-out section at 122, where I suspect that the players were playing anything that came into their fingers, making sure only to end at the right second (which they did).

Where one sits in the hall will colour one's reactions as well. I was on the ground floor on all three evenings, and felt very much 'under' the sound, which rose to the ceiling and to some extent stayed there. Curiously, the orchestra nearest to me on each night was the hardest to hear because of its elevation, and the percussion of all three was more dominant than Stockhausen can really have meant it to be. The electric guitar had a disturbingly plangent sound, and though it may have heraldic solos (like the E-flat clarinet), Stockhausen surely did not intend it to sound so unrelated to all the other instruments.

The LSO certainly gave *Gruppen* three workman-like performances. The excitement of the writing for large orchestra, the beauty of the shimmering colour of the string writing, and the clear pointillistic interplay of many sections came through almost in spite of the players. The relaxed surety which the same orchestra brings to, say, *The Rite of Spring* to make it come thoroughly alive was missing, and without it it was impossible to assess *Gruppen* as a whole—because 25 years after its completion the work must stand (if at all) as a complete piece and not the sum of its components. It's a pity that we are still hedged round by Stockhausen's writings on the work; it's a pity to clutch at the three less serial 'interludes', as Jonathan Harvey calls them, for one's main pleasure; it's a pity to feel anxiety that one might not be following the argument of the groups, for one needs to trace the logic of the entire piece. I am inclined to decide that though I admire the sheer panache of the 29-year-old Stockhausen's writing for orchestra, on the evidence of these performances the design doesn't quite come off. The build-up to group 114 loses its way, and more importantly the composer has mismanaged the final wind-down after the cathartic moment. I don't think that even a more committed performance could remove these problems, but a more committed performance might persuade me otherwise.

Material Received

Records

- Ros Bandt, *Improvisations in Acoustic Chambers* (Move Records MS 3035)
 Ros Bandt and LIME, *Soft and Fragile: Music in Glass and Clay* (Move Records MS 3045)
 Computer Music—Stanley Haynes, *Prisms*; Larry Austin, *Canadian Coastlines*; Charles Dodge, *Any Resemblance*; John Celona, *Music in Circular Motions*; Bruce Pennycook, *Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein* (Folkways Records FTS 37475)
 IRCAM: *un portrait* (Centre Georges Pompidou IRCAM 0001)

Periodicals

- Composer: *Magazine of the British Music Information Centre*, nos.78-9 (1983)
Dansk musik tidsskrift (1981/2), nos.1-6; (1982/3), nos.1-6
Musical Times, vol.124, nos.1683-6 (1983)
Musik-Konzepte: die Reihe über Komponisten, no.31: *Giacinto Scelsi* (July 1983)
Tempo, no.145 (June 1983)

Books

- Stravinsky, Selected Correspondence*, vol.1, ed. and with commentaries by Robert Craft (London: Faber and Faber, 1982)

Contributors to this Issue

Richard Barrett Composer, based in London. He is currently working on a piece for Suoraan commissioned by the New McNaghten Concerts.

Hilary Bracefield Senior Lecturer in Music at Ulster Polytechnic and director of the Mushroom Group which performs experimental and improvised music.

David Byers Composer and Senior Music Producer with the BBC in Belfast. He studied composition at the Royal Academy of Music and with Henri Pousseur at the Liège Conservatoire.

Christopher Fox Composer, performer, and director of the Filter Band (who will include Walter Zimmermann's *Zwiefache* in their 1984 concerts). He is currently involved in an EEC-funded community arts project in Bradford, and is working on commissions from Lontano, Singcircle, and Nora Post (the last is a work for bass oboe).

David Jefferies is studying music at the University of Sussex.

Stephen Montague Freelance composer and pianist, based in London. His works have been performed and broadcast in many countries and he has recently received commissions from the Academy of London Chamber Orchestra and Singcircle, and a Gulbenkian commission for a 40' work for piano and live electronics. He is on the executive committee of EMAS and is one of the organisers of their new concert series.

Elliott Schwartz Composer, and chairman of the music department of Bowdoin College, Maine. He is currently writing a book on 20th-century music.

Graeme Smith is pursuing postgraduate research on the music of Irish immigrants to Australia at Monash University, Melbourne.

Adrian Thomas Composer and Senior Lecturer in Music at The Queen's University of Belfast. He is currently on sabbatical leave at the University of California at San Diego.

Gloria Toplis Part-time lecturer in music at Goldsmiths' College, University of London. She is currently completing a PhD thesis on the music of Stravinsky in the 1940s.

David Wright Part-time lecturer in music at Goldsmiths' College, University of London, and at Trinity College of Music, London.