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PROCESS IN THE AESTHETICAL AND THEORETICAL THOUGHT OF KARLHEINZ STOCKHAUSEN¹

Abstract: Process is the key aspect of Karlheinz Stockhausen's (1928–2007) musical discourse. In this paper, I aim to present the composer's understanding of the word process and mark the place that this word has in the aesthetical and theoretical thought of said composer. The basis for this research is literature and other sources in which process is explained as the recurrent theme when discussing the composer and his music. Hence, the first part of the paper will deal with the definition of the theoretical positioning of this phenomenon. The second part of the paper will deal with the explanation of process-music, a term that includes not only Stockhausen's music, but also the music of other composers. Lastly, in the light of the main subject of this paper, a review of the composition *Prozession* (1967) will be central to the third part of this paper.

Keywords: Karlheinz Stockhausen, process, process-composition, *Prozession*, process-music, supra-humanisation, spirituality, procession, transformation

Stockhausen's understanding of process

Before I turn to Stockhausen, I would like to review the general understanding of the idea of process. What do we usually mean when we use the word *process*? In common usage, the word bears the meaning of something being in progress, or rather, something that will yield results in the end. Oxford Dictionaries define the word process as “a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end” (Oxford Dictionaries n.d.). Furthermore, they define the word process as “a natural series of changes” (Oxford Dictionaries n.d.). Moreover, the Merriam-Webster dictionary holds a definition of the word process that claims that

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process is “a natural phenomenon marked by gradual changes that lead toward a particular result” (Merriam-Webster n.d.). When you type the word “process” in the search box of the Encyclopedia Britannica Online, you will be offered around 10.366 results of various types of processes – those present in computer science, chemistry, photography, medicine, metallurgy, and various other fields of interest (Encyclopaedia Britannica Online n.d.).

Musically speaking, Karlheinz Stockhausen defines process as a “development towards something – without seeing from the start where you are going” (Nevill 1989, 103). Therefore, the basis of the process for Stockhausen is the very unpredictability of the said phenomenon. One would immediately think of the question that imposes itself – could the end result be predictable, while the steps that are needed in order to get to that end result are not? I mean this in a sense of taking necessary steps towards the result you are certain of, or rather, sort of a scientific experiment you would perform in order to prove a hypothesis.

We will see that Stockhausen thinks otherwise, in light of a conversation with Tim Nevill which he further explained that “process does not exist if you deterministically foresee the end right from the beginning so that everything is really simultaneously present. A process requires time and development – and the only justification for time and development is that you cannot see exactly where they are leading. Mystery is a necessary part of process” (Nevill 1989, 103).

Process, it seems, holds great significance in Stockhausen’s philosophical as well as theoretical thought to such an extent that Tim Nevill dedicated one chapter of the book *Towards a Cosmic Music* to the concept of process – naming the chapter after the idea itself. (Nevill 1989, 100–110) while Robin Maconie named the fourteenth chapter of his book *Other Planets: The Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen* (Maconie 2005, 282) after the same word. Likewise, Jonathan Cott dedicated a special segment of his book *Stockhausen: Conversations with the Composer* to the composition of processes (Cott 1974, 151–152). Some explanation of the different theoretical positioning of this word between the three authors is needed. Let us begin with Tim Nevill.

What prompted the discussion between Stockhausen and Nevill on process was Nevill’s question in relation to Stockhausen’s, as Nevill put it, music-theatre project (Nevill 1989, 100), *Licht*. As Stockhausen has stated, “from the start the process is always the most important thing” (Nevill 1989, 101), thus stressing the importance of a so-called process-idea (Nevill 1989, 102) that is usually unknown to the composer himself. I suppose that behind the unknown process-idea lies the formational process it undergoes before it reaches the composer’s mind – a process behind a process. Quite possibly, the very origin of the process-idea could embody the mystery the composer has already underlined, since, according to him, “processes entail much that is mysterious and unexpected” (Nevill 1989, 103). In essence, a process-idea could be understood rather as a kernel-idea from which some particular process will stem and therefore be prompted to develop. I must also mention that Mirjana

Veselinović Hofman, in the same vein, explains that Stockhausen undoubtedly stayed within the frames of the German musical and thought orientation with his own idea of process (Veselinović Hofman 2007, 78). Also, she explains that Stockhausen does not carry sound visions within himself, rather, everything he does stems from the very process of work (Veselinović Hofman 2007, 78).

Stockhausen speaks of many types of processes – process as creation, process as personal development, the process of achieving higher consciousness, the process of transforming everything into human form, the process of development of human civilisation, the process of dying, the process of separating the soul from the body, the process of supra-humanisation... to name but a few. He states that “most of one’s life is spent in experiencing processes – and that is also the case with process-music” (Nevill 1989, 104). Before I explain process-music, I would like to explain some of the above-mentioned processes that Stockhausen highly values and often mentions in interviews and conversations (with authors such as already mentioned Tim Nevill and Jonathan Cott), to name a few, where the topic is himself and his music.

Process of creation - Free jazz and solitude. A particularly interesting process is the collective creative process which, according to Stockhausen, free jazz exemplifies (Nevill 1989, 13) by leading individual players to collaborate in this creative process. Stockhausen comments on the minor setback in this process – namely, that there is “rarely any silence to enable one musician to play for a while” (Nevill 1989, 13). The importance of these ‘breathers’ in the performance is necessary for the structure as a whole, otherwise the performance just becomes noisy and illogical, as we can conclude from Stockhausen’s answer to Nevill. Elsewhere, Stockhausen underlined the importance of silence from which creative processes can stem. Time dedicated to solitude can help one to perform creative acts. I find confirmation in Stockhausen’s words that “very particular discoveries and events can only occur when a man is completely alone – being a vessel in a completely self-responsive, self-responsible activity.” (Cott 1974, 26) Solitude could also bring a better understanding of being in a group or participating in a group, because every individual should dedicate some time to his own development. Self-discoveries carry weight later on in group performing, and Stockhausen had something to say about that too: “the group cannot develop if there isn’t an individual self-discovery developing, on the part of both the individual members and in particular of the one who draws the group together.” (Cott 1974, 26–27) Therefore, the system should allow active musicians the time to rest and also the possibility to distance themselves from groups, orchestras and choirs they perform with actively. Stockhausen stands firmly on the ground of this ideal scenario, expressing concern for the enthusiasm many musicians lost when they decided to take this calling upon themselves. He suggests therefore that we should “start right from the beginning, reawakening that original enthusiasm within ourselves, or give up being professional musicians”. (Cott 1974, 45) He goes so far as to suggest the disbanding of “all orchestras and all choirs for a considerable time, allowing each musician an opportunity to reflect, meditate, and discover why he

or she is alive at all, why he or she makes music, and whether that is an absolute necessity” (Cott 1974, 45-46). As transformative as this idea sounds, it will never come to fruition, because the demands present in the professional lives of musicians limit that possibility.

World culture. The composer also spoke of the process related to the concept of *world culture*, saying that the first stage of the “rapid process of dissolution of individual cultures into a more unified world culture” is “sameness and levelling down” (Nevill 1989, 28). Later on in the book, Stockhausen says that “the entire process of the development of human civilization and culture seems to have involved the unfolding of multiplicity out of a unified culture we no longer know” (Nevill 1989, 109).

Supra-humanisation and dying. Related to supra-humanisation is the process of “transforming everything into human form” (Nevill 1989, 71) where the question imposes itself – “what will become of human beings” (Nevill 1989, 71) – and *when*, I would add. In his *Manifesto for the Young*, written for the *Journal Musical* in Paris in 1968, Stockhausen wrote that “one can only become a higher being by surmounting egocentricity and the fear of losing oneself in the process” (Nevill 1989, 44), having previously explained that only a few individuals will “achieve freedom and supraconsciousness” in this process of supra-humanisation. (Nevill 1989, 44) Besides supra-humanisation, the most important processes are *the process of dying*, and at the very end, *the process of separation of the soul from the body*. (Nevill 1989, 90) The process of dying, of physical death, is connected to Stockhausen’s understanding of death. According to him, “the process of dying is very much longer than a Requiem express”, thus he points out that other cultures (for example, Balinese culture) value death differently than the European culture. These rites may have a certain amount of theatricality to them, or as Stockhausen put it: “this is a great theatrical event with processions, costumes, and special musical instruments...” (Nevill 1989, 90). Ultimately, he came to the conclusion that “developing and dying are in fact the processes which move and interest us, and are the real theme of life and universe” (Nevill 1989, 105).

The composer spoke of death on several occasions: when discussing the adaptation of the human race, of supra-humans and of the individuals that are not adaptable to changes and, therefore at risk of dying out quickly. In the Q&A part of his later published lecture *Four criteria of electronic music* filmed by Allied Artists at Oxford Union in London in 1972, Stockhausen revealed the knowledge of the book *Future Shock*, written by futurist Alvin Toffler (Slotover 1972, 4:10), that prompted his thoughts of supra-humanisation and adaptability of individuals or societies to change. When it comes to the process of dying, Stockhausen’s comprehension of death comes across as very specific. Its origin may be traced back to his childhood experiences of war, when he lost both of his parents and learned the true meaning of destruction. His fascination with death is obvious from his above-mentioned comments which clearly show that he gained knowledge of the death rituals of

different cultures on his travels. His views on destruction are particularly interesting for the reason that he defines destruction as *an opening*. To what? He answers: “every destruction – as one knows from an explosion – releases energy. Then you discover the real power of things” (Nevill 1989, 106). Indeed, one might be reminded of the Big Bang and creation of the Universe.

Creation and intuition. Stockhausen spoke of creation not only in terms of creating his own music, but also of creation at large. He does not consider himself a God-given creator and composer, but rather an aspect of the Almighty himself, writing down the music that must be written. I already pinpointed some of the important discourses that inspired Stockhausen to conceive of a concept of *formula* (Novaković 2017, 175–193), which he introduced with his composition *Mantra* (*Mantra* 1970) – formula as the seed from which the whole new universe will stem, the essence of the composition, the impulse of its existence and further development (Novaković 2017, 182). Bearing what was previously said in mind, as well as Stockhausen’s explanation that “intuition is after all supra-rational” (Nevill 1989, 55) and mainly “in the narrower sense is... a realm beyond the human sphere, which exerts an influence by way of the vibrations constantly bombarding us” (Nevill 1989, 55), we could connect creation with the intuitive activity of the composer in its very progress, considering the fact that these vibrations, as Stockhausen put it, lead us “to carry out specific actions” (Nevill 1989, 55). Subsequently, if these vibrations are to be transposed into actions, says Stockhausen, you could also make music from them (Nevill 1989, 55). As has already been emphasised, Stockhausen does not put an ‘equals’ sign between himself and God, whom he called “the greatest musician of all times, the greatest composer” (Nevill 1989, 114) and “omnipresent in all creative processes of nature, and the artist follows God’s example by attempting to create the living organisms of new works...” (Peters 2003, 161). Since Stockhausen’s glorification of God has been discussed elsewhere, I will proceed with other examples of processes he was interested in.

Construction. One of the most important processes is the process of construction, as Stockhausen put it, of “getting everything under control, starting to plan like an architect...” before actually composing (Nevill 1989, 80). This statement somewhat contradicts the unpredictability of the process itself, but I believe that this construction plan is related to the forming of the process-idea that will later set the composition in motion – or rather, *the process-plan*. Some compositions do bear the marking *the process plan works* or *the plus-minus pieces*, as Ed Chang observes in his detailed guide to Stockhausen’s music. (Chang 2014). Chang’s analysis implies that the term process-plan indicates *controlled improvisation* and goes so far as to call the scores to these pieces *controlled improvisation scores*. (Chang 2014)

It is implied that construction is closely related to the process of composition. Günter Peters commented on the intrusion of *cosmic-rays* into Stockhausen’s process of composition, quoting Stockhausen’s words: “if, in the best moments, I use all my craftsmanship as a constructor, it is necessary that something from an unknown

world shoots into my construction [...] precisely when reason has reached the limit of that which is analyzable and explicable: that is where mysticism begins” (Peters 2003, 150).

Having explored various examples of processes which are recurring themes in Stockhausen’s discourse on music, I will now turn to discussing process-music.

Process-music

Process-music is not necessarily associated with Stockhausen exclusively. It is a term that was attributed to the works of many composers. Michael Nyman, for example, uses the term when referring to the works of Elliott Carter, Morton Feldman, Steve Reich, Terry Riley and others (Nyman 1974). With this term comes another important one – namely, process-composition. Stockhausen named several of his compositions “process compositions”, especially those that contain plus, minus and equal signs as symbols that are indicators for the transformations, as I will further elaborate in this paper on the example of *Prozession* (1967). The compositions *Plus-Minus* (1963 / second version written in 1974), *Prozession*, *Spiral* (1968) and *Kurzwellen* (1968) are some of the pieces that fall into this category. Ed Chang adds the compositions *Expo* (1969–1970) and *Pole* (1970) to this list. (Chang 2014) The term process-composition could also be used when referring to pieces by some of the earlier mentioned composers. However, due to the fact that the main subject of this paper is Karlheinz Stockhausen, I will explain process-music in light of his thoughts on the matter.

As I have said earlier, Jonathan Cott spoke to Stockhausen on the subject of processes. Before that topic, Stockhausen pointed out the importance of by Raymond Ruyer’s book *The Genesis of Living Forms* (*La genèse des formes vivantes*, written in 1958), which he discovered around 1969 – around the time that Stockhausen was, as he put it, “completely in the process of composing processes” (Cott 1974, 151). He added that “early in the sixties I said that what we had to compose was composition and not compositions. We have to compose the process of how to compose rather than composing pieces. You see this everywhere. At the beginning of the sixties, process planning became very significant” (Cott 1974, 151). However, it is important to mention that his endeavors in the field of process composing further lead to the birth of *intuitive music*. I will explain this along with the review of the composition *Prozession*.

Prozession

As Ivana Medić explains, *Prozession* (May, 1967) is an “interesting composition in which Stockhausen applies autocitations” (Medić 2008, 55). According to Medić, the score of this piece formulates a musical process which uses variations of segments from Stockhausen’s previous compositions, which performers perform from memory

(Medić 2008, 55). Additionally, she explains that it was not a coincidence that Stockhausen used the name of a religious ritual when choosing the title of this work, thus “coding his piece in the coordinate system of religious-mystic conceptions” (Medić 2008, 55). Jonathan Harvey describes *Prozession* as “the work in which a lot of freedom is given to the performers” (Harvey 1975, 109). That comes as no surprise, given the fact that Stockhausen pointed out the unpredictability of the process on several occasions. In the first place, Harvey elaborates that *Prozession* was “written for Stockhausen’s group to play on tours, and it presupposes a tremendous *rapport* and intelligence from the players, as the players parts use only +, – and = signs for form and previous works of Stockhausen for material to be shaped into content” (Harvey 1975, 109).

Stockhausen pointed out that each instrument – tamtam, viola, electronium, piano, microphones, filterer and potentiometers (Stockhausen 2013) – has a part consisting of a series (Wörner 1976, 61) of the above-mentioned signs, that indicate the following: “+ indicates higher or louder or longer or more components; – indicates lower or softer or shorter or fewer components and = indicates identical (or similar) register and volume and duration and timbre and number of components” (Wörner 1976, 61). Also, the composer adds that “each player begins with an event when he wishes. As soon as a player finishes an event, he reacts in accordance with the sign in his part either to the event he himself has just played (either immediately or after a pause), or else to the event of another player that is starting next, which he must hear out before reacting to it (hence trios, duos and solos are formed). Any sign (or vertical combination of signs) holds good for one event”. (Wörner 1976, 61–62) In other words, these signs are *transformation signs* (Maconie 1989, 113). The events form the process – that is, procession – that this composition represents. Furthermore, the composer underlines the fact that “in *Prozession* the musicians transformed events from my earlier compositions so that they became new events – often unidentifiable or genuinely unknown” (Wörner 1976, 68). It has been made clear that the process of transformation is at hand – Stockhausen has provided so-called “genetic rules for the development of a music” (Maconie 1989, 114). Transforming certain objects – known objects – and phenomena into something that will be difficult to identify later on was also one of the goals Stockhausen strived for, as later works will demonstrate.

Stockhausen said that the process is unpredictable. Similarly, the end result of some of the pieces of intuitive music may yield a new process or processes – a particular object may or may not be transformed by the end of the performance. Wörner explains that Stockhausen’s composition with “the title that is derived from the very word ‘process’ [...] refers only to a process brought into play and realized in performance, and has no connotation with the procession that is a religious ceremony – a cortège accompanied by the appropriate sacred emblems” (Wörner 1976, 116). On the contrary, Günter Peters wrote that many of the titles of Stockhausen’s compositions allude to “divine revelation and liturgy” (Peters 2003, 140).

I support the opinion of Günter Peters, to which I would like to add my own perspective of this particular problem in view of the fact that every procession has certain emblems. This composition may not refer to any particular religious procession, but it has constant elements – the material from previous Stockhausen works – that may serve as examples of certain types of processual emblems, indicators of the way in which the procession should be guided.

In Maconie's² compilation of transcribed lectures and interviews Stockhausen held, *Prozession* is mentioned in the intuitive music category (Maconie 1989, 112–125). This seems natural in view of the fact that, in *Prozession*, Stockhausen counts on the intuitive activity of the performers that participate in this process, and counts on the result their intuitive activity will provide when their intuition collides with the symbols in the score. This is not intuitive activity in the sense of *Musik für ein Haus* (1968) or *Aus den Sieben Tagen* (1968) – we must bear in mind that there are excerpts of his previous works present in *Prozession* that are essential to the transformations that will take place in the performance of the piece.

Conclusion

As has been shown, process as a phenomenon holds a very important place in Stockhausen's aesthetical and theoretical thought as well as his discourse on music. Process for Stockhausen is understood as development towards something, and it has an air of mystery and unpredictability to it. Special attention was given to the various processes the composer spoke of several times in his interviews and lectures, as well as his conclusion that every individual's life consists of processes. In the end, one must have in mind that all the areas Stockhausen's thought are interlaced and thus, cannot be completely separated when analyzed, because they ought to be looked upon that way. Stockhausen himself is a process, an enigma that continues to intrigue.

² Chapter fourteen in Robin Maconie's book *Other Planets: The Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen* is dedicated to process, (Maconie 2005, 249-270) and reflects his thoughts on the compositions *Plus-Minus*, *Momente*, *Mikrophonie I*, *Mixtur* and others (Maconie 2005, 249–270). It is very interesting that *Prozession* is commented on later, even though the very title of this piece bears in its origin a derivation from the word process. Instead, Maconie groups *Prozession* together with *Hymnen* in chapter fifteen named *Anthems*. (Maconie 2005, 271–288). Be that as it may, Maconie describes *Prozession* as a “programmed structure of transformations, indeterminate in length”, as well as “the first of a series of compositions in which the idea of object displacement takes precedence over definition” (Maconie 2005, 282). Pursuing this further, Maconie claims that *Prozession* “reduces the complicated symbolism of the original *Plus-Minus*” (Maconie 2005, 282). The author traces back the origin of this composition's agenda (Maconie 2005, 282) to the days of Stockhausen's studies under Werner Meyer-Eppeler, additionally stressing the fact that, in order “to understand the intention of *Prozession* as the creation of new musical sentences by transformation processes from existing material, (which is what the work in fact is), is thus to see the work as a musical critique of communications research having implications for linguistic theory” (Maconie 2005, 287).

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Process in the philosophical and theoretical thought of Karlheinz Stockhausen (summary)

As it was shown in this paper, process remained a key word in Karlheinz Stockhausen's philosophical and theoretical thought. This importance was viewed through various processes Stockhausen had the chance of discussing in his interviews, lectures and, most importantly, through his music that perfectly embodied his understanding of said phenomenon. In this paper, I demonstrated the importance of this phenomenon through defining what this word meant for Stockhausen and what it meant in the context of the various processes he spoke about (free jazz and solitude as process; world culture as manifestation of a certain process; process of supra-humanisation and dying; process of creation and intuition and others). Secondly, I turned to presenting process-music and the meaning it holds for Stockhausen, especially in relation to his process-compositions. Also, special attention was dedicated to the overview of the terminology that is in use when one discusses Stockhausen's process-compositions (such as *process-plan works* or *the plus-minus pieces* etc.). Lastly, the main characteristics and main points of Stockhausen's piece *Prozession* (1967) were reviewed in the light of this paper's subject. As I have pointed out, *Prozession* exemplifies the ways in which process, intuition and symbols function together in this piece that shows the importance of transformation and will certainly be the pivotal point of Stockhausen's further development as a composer and a philosopher.

Keywords: Karlheinz Stockhausen, process, process-composition, *Prozession*, process-music, supra-humanisation, spirituality, procession, transformation

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