

Stockhausen's Gruppen

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STOCKHAUSEN'S GRUPPEN

by Roger Smalley

The first British performance of 'Gruppen', at St Andrew's Hall, Glasgow, in 1961; the conductors are John Carewe, Alexander Gibson, and Norman Del Mar

Stockhausen's 'Gruppen' for three orchestras will be performed at the Prom on September 5; the conductors will be Pierre Boulez, Edward Downes, and the composer. The performance will be the second in Britain and the first in London. Roger Smalley, who has worked at Stockhausen's studio in Cologne, introduces the work.

The Background

Gruppen is a landmark in 20th-century music—I would rate it the greatest orchestral work since *The Rite of Spring*, and of similar epoch-making stature. Those of us who got to know the work early on in its life, from highly prized tapes of the first performance (given in Cologne in 1958), were convinced that it could hardly be surpassed. The fact that it has—but only in two subsequent works by the same composer (*Carré* and *Momenta*)—is only evidence of Stockhausen's ever-increasing mastery of the problems of contemporary musical language and its communication. *Carré* and *Momenta* are both so different from *Gruppen* that they have not at all blunted its impact; the initial excitement remains undiminished.

Gruppen was written in 1955-7 and is probably the first work of the post-war generation of composers in which technique and imagination combine on the highest level to produce an undisputable masterpiece. In a brief introduction it is impossible even to begin to analyse the work's incredibly complex micro-structure, but later on I will give an outline of the macro-structure of which this micro-structure is an articulation—the large-scale sections, characteristic textures, uses of instruments and deployment of orchestras which constitute the basic form-building elements and which aurally are unmistakably perceptible. In order to forestall the usual questions about how much of what follows the composer intended the listener to perceive I shall take a stand



and say that to perceive the macro-structure of *Gruppen* is to 'appreciate' the work to exactly the same depth as one 'appreciates' a Beethoven symphony by recognizing the motives, subjects, modulations, movements *etc.* To expect to perceive more would be like asking to perceive every single harmony, passing note, and accompaniment figure in the Beethoven to the same depth as the major structural elements listed above. Because of the speed at which music moves the brain is quite unable to do this, of course, a fact of which Stockhausen is highly aware—as was Schoenberg, who only asked that listeners should perceive his rows in their most foreground manifestations, that is as themes and melodies.

What then, one might ask, is the need for all the unheard complexities? The basic answer is that without them the composition would simply not exist, because this work is a titanic struggle to actualize conceptions and it is the polarity between idea and formulation that gives *Gruppen* its Beethovenian strength. It is important to realize that it has nothing to do with the recent school of Polish textural composers whose flaccid attempts at music making (such as the *Luke Passion* of Penderecki) have been grossly over-praised in this country. In these pieces we can hear to our cost what happens when so-called 'mathematics' (*ie* musical thinking) gets left out.

Instrumentation

The description 'for three orchestras' may be slightly misleading, as the total number of players is 109—in other words approximately the same number as are used in *The Rite of Spring*. They are divided into three groups of 37, 36, and 36 instrumentalists each. The constitution of each group is very nearly the same. Each has about 6 woodwinds, 3 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones and one tuba. There is a preponderance of violins in each string section—8 or 10 as opposed to 4 violas, 2 cellos, and



photo Scottish Daily Express

2 double-basses. Each group also has one keyboard instrument (piano, keyed glockenspiel, or celesta) and one plucked instrument (harp or electric guitar).

Finally, 4 percussionists play in each group. One of each plays instruments of exact pitch—xyloimba, marimbaphone/glockenspiel, and vibraphone/tubular bells. The other 9 percussionists play a variety of approximately pitched instruments, divided into families and distributed equally between the orchestras. The main families are cowbells, metal instruments (tam-tams and cymbals), skin instruments (tom-toms and bongos), wooden instruments (African log drums), and bell-like instruments (tambours de basque and triangles). Stockhausen writes: 'The similarity of the scoring of the three orchestras resulted from the requirement that sound-groups should be made to wander in space from one sounding body to another and at the same time split up similar sound-structures: each orchestra was supposed to call to the others and give answer or echo.'¹

The three orchestras should be seated on raised platforms—Orchestra I to the audience's left, Orchestra II on the normal playing area, and Orchestra III to their right. The three conductors stand facing inwards at the three corners of a triangle and each is thus able to see clearly the beats and cues of the other two.

Genesis

It is useful to have some knowledge of Stockhausen's work leading up to *Gruppen* in order to realize how its structural principles were arrived at.

Form has always been the musical element which has fascinated Stockhausen more than any other, and he has classified his works into six groups tracing the evolution of his formal processes.² The

best known work from the first group is *Kontra-Punkte* for 10 instruments (1952-3). This is an example of 'pointillistic form', a direct development along the lines suggested by the later works of Webern. Here every pitch, together with its dynamic, duration, instrumentation *etc* is of equal importance to every other. The piece as a whole is therefore somewhat formless, because all the possible variants of all the different musical parameters are constantly being traversed with great rapidity, so that no one parameter (high/low, slow/fast, loud/soft *etc*) is ever allowed to predominate for long. Admittedly, the piece *has* unmistakable formal elements, such as the gradual dropping out of the instruments towards the end, leaving only the piano to finish; but these seem to have been supplied from outside and not to have arisen out of the material itself.

Stockhausen's work is a constantly expanding organism, growing by chain reaction. Aspects concentrated on in one work may throw up subsidiary ideas which become the main features of the next. Thus the difficulty of form-building experienced in *Kontra-Punkte* was tackled anew in *Piano Pieces I-IV* (1952). Still using a pointillistic texture, the sounds were now formed into short units in which certain parameters predominate over all others. He called this 'group form', and naturally *Gruppen* ('Groups') falls under this heading, but also under the next one, 'Collective form', because in *Gruppen* the process of organization is taken one step further.

Whereas in group form the groups were a large-scale organization of point sounds, in collective form the groups themselves are used as the building blocks for forms of much greater dimensions than Stockhausen had previously achieved. The importance of individual notes and intervals has greatly diminished in *Gruppen* and they only become perceptible in certain sparsely scored and solo passages. So it is no use listening for motives and themes, but rather for sonority, density, speed, dynamics, and direction of movement.

¹ *Die Reihe*, V, 70

² *Texte zur elektronischen und instrumentalen Musik*, pp.230-251 (Du Mont Dokumente, I).

Ex. 1

Ex. 2

Stockhausen describes the general thinking which led him to the structure of *Gruppen* in his article '... How Time Passes ...'.³ As the title suggests, the main theme of the article is the search for a way of associating durations with pitches. Very briefly, the procedure is as follows:

- An all-interval 12-tone row is chosen;
- an equivalent series of 12 durations is evolved, using 12 perceptibly equal metronome speeds (crotchet = 60, 63.5, 67, 71, 75.5, 80, 85, 90, 95, 101, 107, 113.5, 120);
- these can be *transposed*, like the notes, by altering the basic unit (quaver = one octave up, minim = one octave down etc);
- the intervals of the row are approximated in mathematical proportions (ex 1);
- these proportions give the relative proportions of the groups;
- but the proportions are ambiguous—each (except for the first and last) is associated with both the one preceding and the one following it, and so *overlapping* of groups takes place;
- the micro-structure of each group is a further expression of the basic idea.

As we can see, the basic format of *Gruppen*—a number of overlapping groups in different tempi—is inherent in these ideas. It should be unnecessary to point out at this stage that although the ideas of this work (and other works) of Stockhausen may appear on the surface to be deliberately startling, all his innovations spring from deep expressive and artistic needs.

Overall Form

Gruppen is composed of 174 groups. These are subdivided into seven large sections as follows:

Section	Groups
A	1- 15
AA	16- 22
B	23- 70
BB	71- 77
C	78-113
CC	114-122
D	123-174

Sections A, B, and C constitute the main course of development of the work. In these groups the orchestras are nearly always in different tempi and the musical material is made up of strongly characterized and differentiated sound-blocks. The texture is generally very dense.

³ *Die Reihe*, III, 10; readers who wish to find out more about these aspects of *Gruppen* should consult this article and the articles 'Wherefore, and Why?' by Adriaan D. Fokker and 'Commentary' by Gottfried Michael Koenig in the forthcoming *Die Reihe* vol VIII.

Sections AA, BB, and CC consist of entirely different material. Here all three orchestras always play in the same tempo, and the musical material is made up of solos for individual instruments or groups of instruments of the same family. In contrast to the single-letter sections, where the material is constantly being passed from one orchestra to another, the main musical argument remains in one orchestra at a time, the other orchestras providing backgrounds and commentaries. The textures here are much thinner and provide a natural relief from the intense activity of their surroundings.

Section D follows the climax of the whole work (Section CC) and is the longest section of all. It acts as a coda and consists of a gradual reduction of activity to the end.

Sectional Form

- Section A (1-15) divides into two halves. The first half is characterized by *arco* strings and woodwind. At group 7 the three orchestras come together for the first time in a gradually accelerating tutti. This is dissipated in group 8 by a procedure which runs through the whole of the score—variations of the same idea (in this case a string *glissando* coupled with a keyboard cluster and a single staccato trumpet note) are rotated from orchestra to orchestra.

The second half of Section A consists basically of a long continuum of sound from Orchestra I (group 10) which is decorated by shrill interjections in high register and narrow compass from the other two orchestras (10-13). The final two groups (14 and 15) are solos for Orchestras II and I respectively and seem to act as a kind of coda to the section as a whole. Registers are centralized and the texture refers back to the first half of the section.

In group 15 another idea can be found. This is what Stockhausen calls the 'unilateral treatment of all parameters'. This means that the different musical elements alter in conjunction with each other—in this case the music becomes faster as it gets louder and as it rises in pitch. Or the opposite could happen—for instance in group 114 where the phrases become shorter as the music gets quieter, slower, and falls in pitch.

Mention of pitch brings me to another important aspect of group organization. Each group has a defined pitch-area in which all the activity takes place. The pitch areas of the 15 groups of Section A are shown in ex 2. This divides into two phrases (1-6 and 9-15) which are almost classical in their contour. They start from

narrow intervals in the middle register, expand outwards and upwards, and return to narrow intervals slightly lower in pitch than at the beginning. The central tutti uses the whole pitch-range. This careful control of overall pitch-contour (and, by analogy, of all the other parameters as well) is one of the main reasons why the piece progresses in such broad dramatic sweeps. In order to emphasize the width of each pitch area the notes delineating the outer limits are generally sustained throughout the whole group.

Having used Section A to illustrate some of the basic ideas in the work I shall deal with the other sections in less detail.

(ii) Section AA (16-22) is almost a miniature violin concerto, although the prominence of a solo violin has already been foreshadowed in Section A with three unmistakable solo appearances. Its structure is the mirror image of that of Section A—two dynamic accelerating passages separated by a brief moment of repose. An unaccompanied violin solo acts as a bridge-passage (or ‘monochrome structure’) to . . .

(iii) Section B (23-70) contains predominantly short and sharp sounds, the groups tending to become shorter and more violent as the section proceeds. It divides into four sub-sections (24-35, 36-45, 46-61, 62-70), each of which is heralded by a piercing two-note motive on the E flat clarinet. This is one of the most characteristic instruments in the score and its appearance always marks an important division in the structure. There is a brief lull at group 38 when a *pizzicato* cello, marimbaphone and celesta can be heard, and a brief solo for electric guitar at group 44. These are foreshadowings of their solos in . . .

(iv) Section BB (71-77). Again the structure (four distinct parts) parallels that of Section B. First we have a passage for *pizzicato* cello and bass, with keyed and plucked percussion instruments, which sounds almost as if it had wandered into the score from a piece of ‘cool’ jazz. Then a brief passage of percussive chords from all the orchestras is followed by solo passages for the electric guitar and E flat clarinet. A development of the percussive chordal passage completes the section.

(v) Section C (78-113). The brass comes more and more into prominence during this section; the piano also has brief solo appearances in its high register.

(vi) Section CC (114-122) is the double climax of the whole work. The first climax is built up by brass and piano alone and culminates in a thrilling series of chords thrown with an almost physical impact from one orchestra to another. A piano

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The Tiger’s Mind (see June MT, pp.527-30) is to be performed in October. Anyone interested in taking part is invited to write to Cornelius Cardew (12 Neveon Mansions, London SW5), stating what character they are interested in and in what way they interpret it; also phone number, age, occupation, instruments and equipment owned, experience (if any) in experimental music. No fee is offered, nor guarantee of acceptance.

The 1967 ISCM Festival takes place in Prague, Oct 4-10; programmes include operas by Macha, Pauer, and Burghauser, four orchestral and two chamber concerts; music by 10 composers from Czechoslovakia, two each from France, West Germany, Holland, Italy, Japan, and Spain, and one each from seven other countries, will be heard; no British music is to be given.

Venice Biennale International Festival of Contemporary Music takes place Sept 9-16; it includes a programme of instrumental music by Bussotti, three orchestral concerts (one commemorating the 20th anniversary of Casella’s death, others including music by Dallapiccola, Berio, and Ligeti), and concerts by Swedish Radio Choir and the Musica Viva Pragensis Ensemble.

cadenza relaxes the tension just enough for another and even longer *crescendo* to begin, this time on the drums. First the metal percussion and then the muted brass (sounding rather like Stan Kenton) join in the *mêlée* until for a few brief moments everyone is hammering away for all they are worth.

(vii) Section D (123-174) breaks in immediately, gradually dissipating the tension in a series of wave-like rises and falls. Here the principle of rotation can be heard at its clearest. The following elements rotate:

- (a) a flutter tongued brass chord followed by a single cymbal stroke (123-140);
- (b) a quiet brass chord with tam-tam stroke followed by a flute flutter-tongue (141-144);
- (c) a fluter-tongued flute chord with a single vibraphone stroke (Orchestra II only) (145-152);
- (d) single *sfz* vibraphone strokes (Orchestra II only) (152-154);
- (e) single attacks on the wood-drums (all three orchestras) (155);
- (f) flute flutter-tongues, wood drums continue (156-171);
- (g) *sfz* brass chords (*diminuendo*) (172-173).

It will be noticed that the coda divides into seven sections and (just as the double-letter sections parallel the single-letter ones) it parallels the form of the whole work. During rotation (f) the orchestras unite again in the same tempo, and durations become longer as the pitch descends. A brief outburst at the beginning of rotation (g) is soon quelled and this most marvellous work ends with a romantically dying solo horn.

KARLHEINZ STOCKHAUSEN

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