The world of Stockhausen

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Paul Griffiths's *Guide to Electronic Music* is exactly what its title says it is — a guide to electronic music; the plain man's introduction to a new and largely experimental medium, written if not in words of one syllable, at least in straightforward, non-technical language. As such, it admirably fills a long-felt need. If other books by Griffiths (*Boulez* and *A concise history of modern music*) may perhaps be criticised for a certain limitation of outlook, this one seems to present no discrepancy between its purpose and its achievement. It expounds no original thesis, and beats no drum; that is its strength. Its author sets out simply to show how electronic music began, and how it has evolved, in the thirty years since Pierre Schaeffer first ushered in his *musique concrète*.

To do this, Griffiths divides electronic music into eight categories, or areas of development, more or less chronologically, and mentions some of the main works in each category. He shows convincingly how, of the original studios in Paris, Cologne and New York, it was that in Cologne which was to produce the most

interesting and influential results. Stockhausen is seen as the founding father of electronic music, as we understand the term today — a fact which can also be demonstrated (though Griffiths does not do so) on psychological and political, as well as musical, grounds.

And so it is the career of this composer which emerges as the central theme of the book. In five of the eight categories, Stockhausen's works are taken as the high-point of achievement, and the yardstick for future development. Griffiths is particularly successful not merely in describing the works themselves, but in analysing something of the process and technique adopted by Stockhausen at different points in his life. So we can detect an aesthetic progression, for instance from an early work like *Gesang der Jünglinge*, to a later one such as *Prozession*. In this way the book has movement.

The three categories in which Stockhausen's work is not the central point are *musique concrète* ('sound objects'), rock music, and electronic instruments. This in itself is instructive. Studio technology has not been directed towards the making of sound-producing instruments; there are no 'instrumentalists' in the field of electronic music. The composer of electronic music needs to be equally a musician and a technologist — either without the other is inadequate — as he works not with a new instrument, or in a new style, but with a new medium. As Griffiths well puts it (page 59): 'The result is not so much a composition as a voyage of discovery'.

He is referring specifically to Stockhausen's *Mixtur*, but this remark could well be applied more generally. The electronic composer works outwards from the single sound; he is concerned with sound-quality and sound-synthesis; timbre and density; he has no recourse to an accepted vocabulary, he can call on no tradition, no memory, no cadenced phrase; in performance, tape-music has none of the momentum, or the structured layering of orthodox composition. It is therefore inconsistent and unnecessary to use electronic means to produce quasi-instrumental music, though several such attempts are interestingly described in the course of the book.

Other composers are shown in a satellite, or quasi-satellite, relationship to Stockhausen; even those chronologically earlier, such as Varèse. In this respect Griffiths is, I think, both historically and aesthetically correct. With all far-reaching historical innovations, it is important that the creative initiative should be identified as residing with a particular group, or single person, at a particular time and place. To take other examples from our century, the creative initiative in the field of jazz lay, and lies still, with the American Negro, as it was his specific and unique invention; conversely, serialism arose as the necessary solution to musical problems, in a very different context, for a group centered in Vienna. In the same way electronic music, as an artistic invention, may be precisely ascribed to the Cologne School under Stockhausen, for he treated the new medium with greater imagination, and with greater technical and musical insight, than anyone else. Other composers are thus seen either to derive from him or to react against him.

As he projects this central theme of the book, Griffiths colours his narrative with several apt phrases to describe the hopes and aspirations of the electronic composers: '. . . over a vaster plane, and therefore to a greater extent' (page 26), . . . the all-encompassing freedom of the electronic medium' (page 36), '. . . the intimacy of the electronic medium' (page 38). Aesthetically this is only half the story; what matters is whether these hopes and aspirations remain ideal, or become actual; whether the grasp of the electronic composers is equal to their reach. The success of electronic music in performance is of course another matter; but at least Griffiths has presented their case, succintly and clearly.

The book also contains a useful summary of some of the best-known composers of electronic music, with brief biographical notes, and a listing of their records. Naturally the author has been selective. Over the years the electronic medium has attracted its fair share of phoneys. Many whose compositional skill would be severely strained to write so much as a simple prelude for piano, have turned to electronics in the fond hope that somehow or other they will thereby turn themselves into composers, with something new and important to say. These have for the most part been omitted, though one or two are mentioned. While this does not really matter, there are, on the other side of the fence, some omissions that I do not understand, particularly in this country. Birtwistle is mentioned, but not Jonathan Harvey; Tim Souster is included, but not Roger Smalley; Peter Zinovieff, but not Tristram Cary. EMS is not mentioned at all. While perhaps such omissions are peripheral in a book whose main subject is Stockhausen, it is surely a pity to allow them.

PAUL GRIFFITHS
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Karlheinz Stockhausen — Photo: Clive Barda