

ESSAY

NAM

JUNE PAIK

TO THE "SYMPHONY FOR 20 ROOMS"

One evening in the summer of 1960 I visited Karlheinz Stockhausen with the intention of explaining to him that fixed form has to be maintained because it is based on the form of sex, one-direction-crescendo (can you imagine a many-direction-crescendo? We have but one heart), climax, catharsis - human nature - Ying Yang - Nature of Nature - proton and electron.

As if he had expected me to say something like this (and I never got around to really say it to him), he began to explain that we must get rid of fixed musical form because it is like sex. It has no freedom. It is as old as the theory of tragedy of Aristotle, of Faust, etc. Then Stockhausen explained the possibility of a free and calm love.

In his yet unfinished piece "Paare" (pairs) there is neither a fixed beginning nor ending. The audience may come into the concert hall and leave freely. And come back. All the while the music continues, for 5-6 hours or more until the last listener has left.

This idea impressed me but did not convince me because at that time I had been seeking for "the last consummate second". In vain I had been working for half a year in order to "fix" on tape this last consummation of 30 seconds.

Next spring, on my way to take a cure at Titisee, while looking out of the window of the moving train, I realised for the first time the old Zen-Cage thesis:

"It is beautiful, not because it changes beautifully, but - simply - because it changes."

If nature is more beautiful than art is, it is not so because of its intensity or complexity but because of its variability, abundant abundance, endless quantity.

The word "quality" has two different meanings although in everyday usage the meanings are rather mixed-up.

1-"good, better, best"- it permits the possibility of comparison.
2-Character, individuality, 'Eigenschaft', - it excludes the possibility of comparison.

We can put an end to (aufheben) quality (in its first meaning) by means of the formidable quantity, endless variability, abundance of the mediocres. Then only the second meaning of quality (character, individuality, etc) remains. One can arrive at a consciousness of quality (second meaning) through some religious experience or by another extreme situation. Then each single moment becomes independent. One forgets as quickly as children do. Stockhausen's new term "Moment" seems to me to be of strong importance in this connection.

But how can one arrive at variability without losing intensity. Unifying variability and intensity has been one of the most important problems. Is intensity (tension, high voltage) essential to life? Perhaps one has to substitute this physical dimension rather by a spiritual or ideological dimension, f.i. ambiguity, depth, etc., if there is such a dimension.

Everyone can experience this consciousness through love for a while. The Zen priest also aims at a kind of calmness or calm ecstasy, but an eternal extended one, without crescendo, climax, catharsis, - the causes for delusion, illusion, error and deception and self-deception. Therefore they say that love is as bad as hatred.

They train themselves to diminish, level and balance the amplitudes and frequencies of the waves of their love, hatred and life. - Zen requires hard training. Many neglect or try to neglect this under the disguise of "natural nature" or "good taste". Who is trained, can endure better the tediousness. I admire the "Music of Changes" most of all because it is Cage's most tedious composition.

In my last compositions - "Homage a John Cage", "Etude for Piano", "Simple", "Variation on Themes of George Brecht and La Monte Young", "Etude platonique no.1", - I have tried to demonstrate that there is the absolute, and that(=the absolute) IS the absolute.

In the next series of my compositions - "Symphony for 20 Rooms", "Etude platonique no.2 for 10 Rooms and a Beautiful Girl (as tedious as possible)", "Read Music - Do It Yourself (Answers to La Monte Young)", "Bagatelle americaine", "Half-time" - I will try to demonstrate that the relative IS the absolute. Do I need to also demonstrate that the absolute IS the relative? This latter thesis you will encounter on each single day of your life and love - from Joseph Stalin till Anton Webern,.....

As I mentioned before: it was Stockhausen's idea to let the listeners leave and come into the concert hall freely. John Cage wanted to compose his "Music Walk" for two rooms of the "Galerie 22" in Düsseldorf where the listeners were supposed to move freely from one room to the other. When the piece was first performed there, this was not realizable. With respect and appreciation I note Cage's and Stockhausen's priority in this respect; although art is often a bastard the parents of which we do not know.