

KARLHEINZ Stockhausen sits at his custom-made mixing console in the middle of the auditorium of the Opernhaus, Leipzig, in what was East Germany, staring into a brilliant blue void. He is 65 years old and guru-like: bald on top, with longish hair at the back, dressed all in white, with a startled yet inward look in his eyes as if he has just received a divine revelation.

The void into which he stares is the stage on which 'Dienstag' (Tuesday), the latest section of his cosmological opera entitled 'Licht' (Light), is being rehearsed. A huge bird with outstretched wings is suspended from the ceiling. The composer is listening to the sound emanating from eight loudspeakers — four on the ceiling and four around the floor.

'Dienstag' is the fourth opera in Stockhausen's seven-part cycle, one for each day of the week. It has taken him 16 years to write four operas — 'Donnerstag' (Thursday), 'Samstag' (Saturday), 'Montag' (Monday), 'Dienstag' — and part of a fifth, 'Freitag' (Friday). At this rate, he will not be finished until the early part of the next century.

Since 1977, when the initial inspiration for the cycle came to him while meditating in a Japanese temple garden, Stockhausen has devoted his creative energies to nothing else. To complete the cycle, he has entered a phase of his working life as severely isolated as it is productive.

Perhaps it is best, for those who consider Stockhausen's music the most important this century, to see 'Licht' as the biggest risk, the most daring and provocative gesture of all, in a career that has been dedicated to reinventing music. Otherwise, we risk seeing 'Licht' as a turning away into a Teutonic twilight, significant only to the maestro himself in his autumn years. This is the problem Stockhausen now confronts us with: is he involved in the great masterpiece of his career, or has he disappeared into his own mystical world, his greatest compositions, and the historical moment in which they mattered, behind him?

This is the first time that one of Stockhausen's operas has been produced on German soil, and it has only happened as a consequence of unification. Each day, in the week leading up to 'Dienstag's premiere on 28 May, television reporters asked: "How does it feel to be producing 'Licht' in Germany?" And each day, he gave a thorough, courteous answer: he is very pleased, and very grateful to Udo Zimmermann, director of the Leipzig Opera (which is celebrating its 300th anniversary) who invited him here.

He politely declines to mention that in his native western Germany, a country with about 120 opera houses (the largest number in Europe) and an educated, prosperous population of music lovers, not a single company has staged a production of 'Licht' since he began the cycle. It is an irony that fills him with bitterness. Although he has been dedicated to creating a new music for the post-war era, freed from the burdensome traditions of the past, he has always thought of himself as a German composer, identifying above all with Beethoven. Yet, Stockhausen must see his operas produced piecemeal, here and there across Europe, and himself as a prophet, spurned in his own land.

"It is because they are ashamed in Germany of the old German tradition of cosmic music that comes from India," he says. "They are nervous about it because of the Third Reich, and they don't want it associated with the new German tradition."



Picture: GERARD UFERAS

Karlheinz Stockhausen: his mind is like that of a manic-depressive that is always in the exalted phase.

Licht fantastic

Karlheinz Stockhausen's seven-part opera cycle is ambitious and provocative. But is it a masterpiece, or the work of a madman?

EDWARD FOX talks to the maestro about his 16-year obsession.

Stockhausen was born in 1928 and grew up under the Third Reich. His father, a village schoolmaster, was obliged to collect funds for the Nazi party. His mother suffered from depression, was hospitalised and finally put to death under a Nazi program of eliminating the mentally ill. His father died in the war. Stockhausen attended a regimented state boarding school, where and where religious observance was forbidden.

Out of this bleak history came Stockhausen's mission to create art that made a complete break with the past, that never cited tradition, and that created a new approach to music with every new work. The formative phase of his career was the period he spent, from 1951, at the newly established electronically treated sounds. It was more like a scientific laboratory than a musical conservatory; there, he conducted research into electronic music. It was the futuristic, technological utopianism of the post-war period applied to music.

In the decades that followed, the same rigorous, questing spirit led Stockhausen

to create some of the fundamental ideas and approach of contemporary art music. Though his work often inspires dread in a conservative musical establishment, no one would dispute his stature as one of the century's most important composers.

IF YOU ask Stockhausen what 'Dienstag' is about, he refers you to a 100-page synopsis in German. It seems to dramatise a conflict between the Archangel Michael (whom Stockhausen credits with the creation of the world) and Lucifer, first in contest for the soul of man, then in a battle of heavenly armies — made up of bizarrely dressed musicians carrying brass instruments, as well as amplifiers and electronic samplers — culminating in the triumph of neither, in fact. Fully staged, it is a masterpiece of imagination.

In Stockhausen's view, 'Licht' is an opera for unborn future generations of spiritually advanced beings, for whom metaphysical conflict is a natural subject. Because most of us have not

reached this level of metaphysical attainment, the operas seem to be performed in a strange, incomprehensible language.

Staging 'Licht' is complicated by the fact that it contains scenes that can never be realised because they rely on technology that does not exist. At one point, for example, performers are required to fly around the theatre, with music emanating from their bodies from invisible sources.

Another problem is that the very idea of expansion of consciousness has slipped off our cultural agenda — unlike the '60s, when Stockhausen was very much at the centre of things. He was living in New York and California, engaged in a tempestuous love affair (though still married at the time to his first wife, Doris) with an artist named Mary Mauermeister, and knew all the leading contemporary painters and composers, including John Cage, Leonard Bernstein and Morton Feldman. He listened to rock music, which he came to detest, and used expressions like "It really blows my mind". He told his biog-

rapher Michael Kurtz that "John Lennon often used to phone me". Through his teaching, in particular, he introduced fundamental ideas about what music was and could be, and they formed the idiom of contemporary art music: the use of noise, the emphasis on timbre, the use of electronics and tape, and the development of techniques of intuitive music.

By the end of the decade, Stockhausen felt himself rejected by America. Instead of his music, Americans wanted "easy art": pop art in painting and minimalism in music. Stockhausen's work was too difficult, too uncompromising.

Although 'Licht' was begun in 1977, the germ for the introspective phase of Stockhausen's life was sown during the New York premiere of 'Hymnen', a work for tape and orchestra. After the performance, a prophet-like figure named Johannes approached Stockhausen and gave him a book. He represented the Urantia Foundation, a theological sect formed around the Urantia Book, a 2100-page account, written anonymously in Chicago in the '30s, of angelic beings and life on other planets in an elaborate, benign, multiple universe. It is from this book that Stockhausen has derived many of the ideas for 'Licht'.

The mind of Stockhausen is like the mind of a manic-depressive that is always in the exalted, manic phase of the cycle. Stockhausen never gets depressed because, he says, "I experienced enough during the first 16 years of my life for a whole lifetime. I don't give too much importance to the ups and downs of the human psyche."

His ideas have an extraordinary resemblance to the delusions of a manic patient: the firm belief in a divine mission and in an elaborate, home-made cosmology and, in particular, the ceaseless creative activity that would drain the energy of a normal person. Imagery of flying is a dominant motif in his thinking: he believes human beings used to be able to fly at some time in pre-history.

Stockhausen depends on family members and long-term musical disciples to perform his music, rather than conventional orchestras. He feels "disgust and decades of disappointment with the whole orchestral system, its star conductors and its musicians". His performers comprise a kind of solar system with the composer at the centre and an inner circle orbiting around him: his long-time companion, Suzanne Stephens, a clarinetist, a younger favorite, Kathinka Pasveer, who plays the flute, his sons, Markus and Simon, and his daughter, Majella.

Although 'Licht' seems a final, grandiose gesture in Stockhausen's extraordinary career, he has ideas for further cycles. As 'Licht's predecessor, 'Sirius', was an opera about the course of the year, 'Licht' about the seven days of the week, so he wants 'Licht' to be followed by operas about the 24 hours of the day, about the minutes of the hour and, finally, about seconds.

Among the burdens a genius must bear are the distractions of an imperfect world. Stockhausen lives in an unusual house that he built himself 29 years ago, a cluster of hexagonal rooms, in a wooded landscape outside Cologne, in a village called Kurten. He describes with animated exasperation the numerous interruptions that interfere with his work.

One day, for example, an American turned up at the house. "He had come on a cheap flight to the airport near where I live," Stockhausen recalls, "just to see me. Well, they cannot just come like that, why don't they write? I always say to Suzi: 'Close the gate after the mailman, close the gate!'"

The Independent