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English Bach Festival

Stockhausen

by RONALD CRICHTON

The Festival ended on Friday night with the *St. John Passion* given by the Monteverdi Choir of Hamburg in Brompton Oratory, and a Stockhausen evening in the Festival Hall. It is largely due to the EBF's championship of Stockhousen that such events no longer seem the ventures into unknown territory that they did ten years ago. But there are more important things than initial excitement. Apart from his purely musical achievement (and London is still in no position to pigeon-hole that) Stockhausen has usefully shaken up the usual division between classical and pop audiences.

The stalls on Friday were decently filled, the tiers behind the platform were jammed with kids unfurling banners saying presumably (my eyes were not quite good enough) *Musik meanz Karlheinz*. For the composer was there in person to control the sound equipment for *Kontakte*, the largest if not the newest work on the programme. His presence and his efficiency are insurance against the amateurishness that still dogs musical life in England even in these technological spheres, with its obstinate implication that it is morally and artistically preferable to do things badly, that professionalism is somehow suspect.

The tone of the evening was not, as it turned out, right for banner-waving or prommery. The programme began with *Klavierstück IX* played by Gérard Frémy Though the pounding, repeated chords with which it opens would command attention anywhere, especially with an amplified piano, it was not the ideal way of opening a Festival Hall concert. There followed the percussion solo *Zyklus* (Jean-Pierre Drouet), always fascinating, a little less so in an all-Stockhausen programme than in a mixed one in a small hall, when it has a habit of dwarfing its companions.

Intervall, the new work (world première, indeed), is a game for two pianists—on this occasion Roger Woodward and Jerzy Romaniuk—building up from single notes to big chords, varying intervals and dynamics, stripping the chords down, humming what is left. At the end one player followed the other stealthily off stage, each humming one note of a minor third as if, in the bowels of the hall, unheard by the audience, they were going to do the *Dead March in Saul* as part of some secret ritual. For most of the time the game held the attention, and might have done so all through if the players' hands as well as their faces had been visible from the front.

Kontakte, more than ten years old already, is a long piece of mixed electronic and instrumental music. At least as far back as the front of the terrace, the four groups of speakers really did provide the impression of sound swirling round the listener, so well adjusted by Stockhausen from his central panel that it was engulfing but never crude or painful. There was one descending spiral as beautifully tapered as a phrase from a master pianist. My fault no doubt that about three-quarters of the way through I lost the thread, began to find the sound of the real instruments (piano and percussion) inadequate compared with the endlessly changing colours of the electronic cloak with which they were surrounded, and thought wistfully of Bach in Brompton Road.