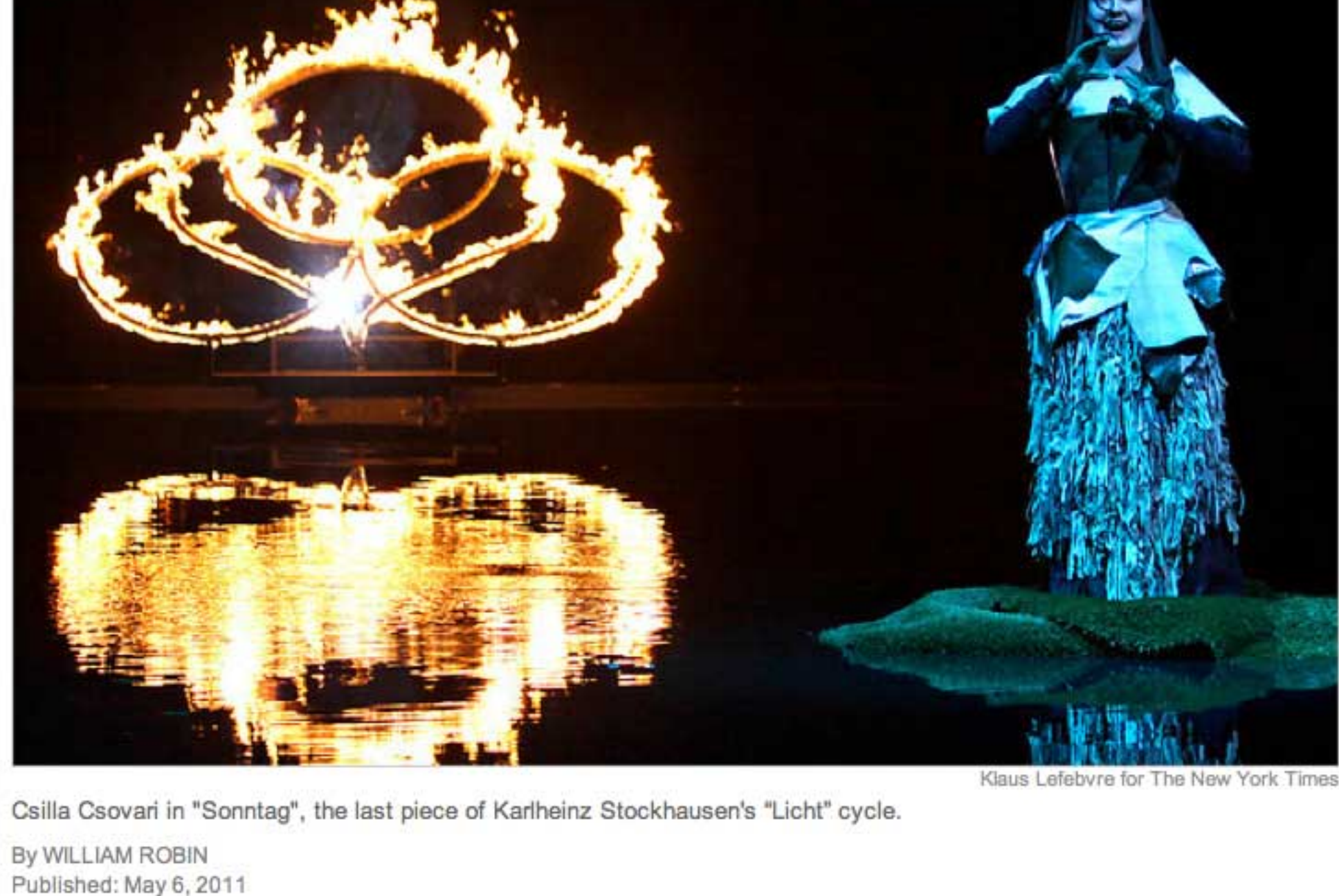


An Operatic Conundrum Untangled



Csilla Csovári in "Sonntag," the last piece of Karlheinz Stockhausen's "Licht" cycle.

Klaus Lefebvre for The New York Times

By WILLIAM ROBIN
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The German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, conducting, in 1984. The Cologne Opera is presenting "Sonntag," the last piece of his "Licht" cycle.

AFTER a triumphant premiere at the New York Philharmonic in 1971, the story goes, the German composer [Karlheinz Stockhausen](#) was approached by a strange figure. Clad in a goatskin cape, carrying a staff and holding a thick book, the man stood out even amid the colorful throng of hippies and bohemians who had shown up to hear Stockhausen conduct his "Hymnen." The stranger introduced himself, played a self-made flute and offered up the heavy tome under his arm, asking Stockhausen to become "the minister of sound transmission."

So he did. The quasi-Christian mix of science and religion in "[The Urantia Book](#)" — the text Stockhausen bought from the wizardly figure — became the spiritual basis for a huge operatic cycle, "Licht" ("Light"). Written from 1977 to 2003, "Licht" exceeds even Wagner's "Ring" cycle in its epic proportions, comprising seven full operas, one for each day of the week, and clocking in at 29 hours total.

Stockhausen died in 2007, without having seen "Licht" staged in its entirety. But his work has found new life at the [Cologne Opera](#), which in recent weeks presented the culmination of the cycle, "Sonntag" ("Sunday"). To house the production the company built two theaters within the cavernous Staatenhaus am Rheinpark, part of the city's exhibition center.

The local ensemble [musikFabrik](#) joined forces with the Catalan directorial team [La Fura dels Baus](#) and several longtime Stockhausen collaborators, including the flutist and electronics specialist Kathinka Pasveer and the conductor Peter Rundel. Although various scenes from "Sonntag" have been performed in concert, the Cologne performances constituted the premiere of the complete [opera](#).

The long and difficult journey of "Licht" was paralleled by a steady diminishing of Stockhausen's reputation; after a while even new-music aficionados tired of his narcissistic, singular devotion to the opaque theology of the operas. He retreated from public life and seemed to lose touch with reality: a condition confirmed by a [misguided response to 9/11](#), in which he invoked the villain of "Licht" by calling the attacks a Luciferian masterwork, rousing widespread outrage.

But Stockhausen was a musical titan in the period after World War II, part of an artistic generation fanatically committed to innovation. Enormously influential at the Darmstadt summer courses in Germany, the unofficial headquarters of the avant-garde, he wrote music fueled by mathematical procedures and experimental rigor.

By the mid-1950s, starting with his electronic cantata "Gesang der Jünglinge" ("Song of the Youths"), Stockhausen began directing his scientific processes toward a spiritual plane. A Roman Catholic who rejoined the church in 1947 after the unofficial Nazi suppression, Stockhausen grew to embrace a plurality of religions. (In 1961 he excommunicated himself to pursue an extramarital affair with the painter Mary Bauermeister.) He considered himself "suprareligious," worshiping equally gods of Christian, Buddhist, Aztec and Mayan the total spirit.

In the '60s Stockhausen composed abstract, pointillist works alongside Cagean happenings, achieving the status of a cult hero among academics and rock legends alike. (His picture appears in the photo montage on the cover of "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.") Toward the end of the decade he turned to writing esoteric, improvisatory theatrical pieces, the predecessors of "Licht."

Though Stockhausen called it opera, "Licht" more closely resembles a medieval mystery play or the sacred festival drama of Wagner's "Parsifal." Essentially plotless, the cycle rotates around three archetypes from "[The Urantia Book](#)" — the Christlike angel Michael, his rebellious counterpart Lucifer, and the earth mother Eve — and each opera deals with a single character or combination of characters. The roles are taken variously by singers, dancers and instrumentalists. A compositional "superformula" containing the themes for each character underlies all the music. In writing his own librettos Stockhausen invented a mythology drawing on multiple cultural traditions, from Japanese Noh theater to German folklore. Lofty atonal avant-gardism brushes against jazzy free-for-alls; abstruse mysticism jostles with crude humor.

Not the least of the problems the cycle poses for conventional opera houses are its near-impossible logistical demands. Despite several attempts no company has found a way to pull off "Mittwoch" ("Wednesday"), partly because it incorporates Stockhausen's infamous "Helicopter String Quartet," in which each member of the ensemble flies in a separate helicopter, but also because the music is so fiendishly difficult. Other parts of "Licht" have been staged by La Scala in Milan, the Leipzig Opera in Germany, the Royal Opera in London and now the Cologne Opera, though never without difficulties. "Donnerstag" ("Thursday") had its premiere in 1981 without its final act because of a dispute with the La Scala chorus. (Stockhausen apparently retained a sense of humor about the affair; the penultimate scene of "Samstag," "Saturday," also written for La Scala, abruptly halts when the orchestra goes on strike.)

Many admirers of the music found fault with the far-out scenarios of the operas. Stockhausen dwells on dated clichés of the eternal feminine and indulges in autobiographical episodes that might have embarrassed even Richard Strauss. (The entire first act of "Donnerstag" is a retelling of Stockhausen's youth, complete with a conservatory entrance exam.)

In a 1988 review of "Montag" ("Monday") in the journal *Tempo*, Richard Barrett wrote that the composer's powerful score was "embarrassingly let down by the puerile and insulting dramaturgy." Nicholas Kenyon, writing in *The New Yorker*, described a 1980 performance of "Donnerstag" as "full of arresting ideas but in grave danger of collapsing under the weight of its metaphysical pretensions." For years German critics were split between were mostly positive.

Still, more than a few great composers have overburdened their works with metaphysical baggage, and portions of "Licht" show Stockhausen at the height of his powers, summoning the fierce energy of earlier works like "Gruppen" — his 1957 piece for three orchestras, which the New York Philharmonic will perform at the Park Avenue Armory next season — and his 1968 vocal piece "Stimmung."

"Sonntag" contains music of a profound serenity, unlike anything else by Stockhausen, fitting for an opera dedicated to the adoration of God. Composed from 1998 to 2003, "Sonntag" stands as the final chapter of the cycle, staging what Stockhausen called "the music of the mystical union of Michael and Eve" over five scenes and an epilogue.

In an extended greeting a soprano and a tenor representing the main characters muse on the planets and moons of the solar system, accompanied by melodic fragments that rotate among 29 instruments. After a polychoral procession of angels singing in seven languages, Eve and Michael return, now manifested as a quartet of a tenor and three instrumentalists, whose carefully notated movements mirror the intertwined counterpoint of their music. Six vocalists burn incense while hypnotically describing the scents released and their relationship to the days of the week.

In the finale, "Hoch-Zeiten" (a German neologism suggesting both high times and marriages), Stockhausen places the chorus in one room and the orchestra in another. Each ensemble, divided into five groups, performs identical, synchronized music, and electronic manipulations allow the audience in one hall to hear the music of the other. After the antiphonal tapestry concludes, the audience switches rooms and hears it all again. (The Cologne Opera, because of budget constraints, used a recorded choir alongside the musikFabrik players.) A shimmering "Sunday Farewell" for five synthesizers plays as the listeners depart.

To match Stockhausen's grand music the Fura dels Baus team created ambitious stagecraft, combining ancient ritual with high-tech spectacle. Costumes ranged from simple white robes to colorful, glowing space suits. Michael soared through the air atop a mechanical horse suspended from a crane. For the third scene the audience donned "Avatar"-style 3-D glasses to view shifting projections and live dancers writhing in a pool of water.

In an e-mail Carlus Padrissa, the director, referred to the opera as an oratorio, "a praise to the divine creator of nature."

"A triangle of archetypes represents the essential cosmic powers, wandering through the dazzling labyrinths of attraction, mysticism and lust, between the feminine and masculine, between passion and sense," Mr. Padrissa added. "'Licht' is the union of music and therapy, of art, science and spirituality."

Stockhausen presided over his opera productions with the same intensity with which he supervised his performances, though he never took on the mantle of director. The absence of the composer leaves open the question of his approval of this production, but Thomas Ulrich, its dramaturge, said La Fura dels Baus did justice to Stockhausen's vision.

"The approach is not in any way intellectual, but very direct, with much fantasy," Mr. Ulrich said recently. "There's the spirit of daring something, to go to some limits, and that's the spirit of Stockhausen."

After a 34-year cosmic journey "Licht" is finally coming to a close: only "Mittwoch" remains to be staged. The challenge of eventually presenting the entire cycle seems enormous. Ms. Pasveer, one of the musical supervisors of the "Sonntag" production, envisions a collaboration among multiple companies in Germany. Several opera houses in the West German Rhein-Ruhr region could each stage a portion of "Licht," with the public traveling from city to city to hear a different opera each evening. La Fura dels Baus and musikFabrik are eager to take up the challenge, though it could be years before a full cycle commences.

"Death is only the beginning of an endless career of adventure, an everlasting life of anticipation, an eternal voyage of discovery," says "[The Urantia Book](#)."

The minister of sound transmission is gone. It is left to his followers to complete his utopian voyage.

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