

CONTACTS...

APRIL 1960: Project Ozma begins operations using a radio telescope to listen for intelligent life beyond Earth. In th

SEPTEMBER 1959: Nikita Khrushchev is the first Soviet leader to visit the US, for talks with President Eisenhower. See page 37..

DECEMBER 1958: SCORE becomes the first artificial satellite designed for global communications. It

While Karlheinz Stockhausen was working on *Kontakte*, or “Contacts,” during the two years leading up to June 11, 1960, when this composition for pianist and percussionist with electronic sound on tape had its first performance, the principle of meeting, of communication, was very much in the air. Summit conferences of world leaders, always involving those of the colossally armed United States and Soviet Union, kept staving off the threat of a conflict that could have virtually eliminated life from the planet. Satellites, if partly motivated by military concerns, stepped up the range and the speed of telecommunications. Scanning the heavens, we began searching for another Earth. *Kontakte*, partly in its use of electronically created sound, offered an image of encounter from another domain of technical research. Contact comes about here between pianist and percussionist, and between both and the electronic sound laid down at the time on tape.

The work’s importance to Stockhausen is marked by the many lectures and articles he devoted to it, as well as the many performances he supervised, bringing audiences around the world into contact with this music of contact. For evidence of its wider significance, we can point to the frequency with which the recording of the première goes on being reissued, the frequency also of new performances, and the piece’s immense progeny of works that continue and extend its innovations.

Concerts of electronic music had been given before the *Kontakte* première—the world’s first was up at Columbia in 1952—but Stockhausen provided in this new piece a work that demanded live experience, a work with sonic drama written into it. Its span of over half an hour, itself highly unusual at a time when composing electronic music demanded a laborious process of cutting and splicing lengths of magnetic tape, is initiated by the

percussionist with a circular stroke on a large tamtam (rimless gong). Sounds spin, slam and skip within the virtual space created by four banks of loudspeakers, and move also within the performance area, to and fro between the live performers or between them and the tape. Dialogue, by which chamber music is defined, is reproduced in a different way, within and between different acoustic regions.

It was typical of Stockhausen that he did not immediately follow *Kontakte* with something else for live performers and tape. He perhaps realized that the sensational interactions of this work could not be repeated, and decided rather to pursue different avenues the composition had opened up. One was that of having electronic equipment on the concert stage—an innovation soon to have boundless consequences in popular music. As the 60s went on, almost every Stockhausen piece was to require this: synthesizers and other electronic instruments, electronic means of transforming live sound, radios used as musical instruments, and so on. Other composers, of course, were going in similar directions, notably John Cage.

Another new aspect lay in how *Kontakte* put forward a chamber instrumentation more in tune, it would have seemed, with modern life than the fusty old string quartet. At a time when the repertory for solo percussionist was still pretty thin, the presence of such an individual as a chamber player was new and full of possibilities. And because percussion sounds, especially untuned percussion sounds, could be notated with no more than limited precision (instruments vary, and much depends not only on the force but also on the placing of an attack), writing for them became relatively loose, introducing—or reintroducing—something else to chamber music: improvisation.

Kontakte also changed chamber music into live theater. Not only was the production of sounds in this piece itself dramatic—some of them coming from actions manifest and bold, others arriving unseen from out of the speakers—but also, Stockhausen came up with a new version in 1961, *Originale* (“Originals”), in which the two musicians are joined by other performers in a piece of varied and largely uncoordinated behaviors. And though this has rarely been revived, it did institute a turn in Stockhausen’s thinking, towards the operas and smaller theater pieces on which he was to concentrate for the whole last three decades of his life.

Indeed, so revolutionary was the work, and in so many ways, that to describe it as “chamber music” at all strains at the genre’s usual connotations. *Kontakte* takes chamber music right away from the domestic comfort zone; it is music not of conversing partners but of distinct individuals: a pianist and a percussionist, with their separate resources and sound worlds. Each of them, nevertheless, is in communication—in contact, musical contact—with the other, and each of them is in contact, too, with the inexhaustible realm behind the loudspeakers. They maintain those lines of contact, into a world where chamber music has left home.

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