

In Media Res (into the middle of things): Kathinka Pasveer, Stockhausen's muse

By Helen Bledsoe

Kathinka Pasveer has spent her entire professional life at the centre of a creative vortex. As Karlheinz Stockhausen's flutist collaborator and member of his household for twenty-five years, she premiered and recorded thirty-eight works by Stockhausen (fourteen solo works for flute, twenty-four chamber works), of which many are dedicated to her. She assisted him in the electronic studio and devoted boundless energy teaching and coaching his solo and chamber works. Since his passing in 2007, things have not slowed down for Kathinka. When I met her in Kuerten on 2 July 2010 for this interview, she had just returned from London, working with the BBC for a recording of Jubilee for orchestra, which Stockhausen had composed in 1977.

Oliver Knussen managed to get the BBC Symphony Orchestra for three full days. We recorded with about eighty microphones on fifty-five different channels and had to look for microphones from all the other studios! I will mix it next week here in Cologne and then it will be published on CD 100 of the Stockhausen Complete Edition (www.stockhausen.org). This is a new part of my job. Stockhausen did all of his mixing himself, so when he died, I was left with the question: who is going to do this job? I know how he would have done it because for twenty-five years I sat in each rehearsal and was in the studio every day with him when he was producing new electronic works or recording and mixing CDs. So he prepared me for this work. It's a big responsibility but like it very much.

I was amazed that Kathinka had the energy to do this in the wake of the (posthumous) premiere of Stockhausen's Klang cycle with musikFabrik in May 2010. For this marathon of two twelve-hour concerts in nine different halls, Kathinka had not only rehearsed the musicians for the performances and recordings, mixed the recordings, sat at the mixing console for the performance of Stockhausen's work *Ascension* but also played the flute in the thirty-minute trio *Schoenheit (Beauty)* for bass clarinet, flute and trumpet.

Performing is nice—I feel at home. Rehearsing musicians was at first difficult because I had not done that before and didn't know if they would accept me. I had to do it because Stockhausen never published a work before rehearsing with musicians, because there are always things that are not possible, too high, too low, and so on. He always made changes so that in the end both were happy. During rehearsals now I made changes, not compositional changes, but adaptations for specific instruments also concerning dynamics.



Kathinka Pasveer performing Stockhausen's *Freia*. Photograph by Andreas Birkigt.



Kathinka Pasveer with Karlheinz Stockhausen in 1993 at the Teatro Comunale in Modena. Photograph by Roland Paolo Guerzoni.

Kathinka, it strikes me that in order to do what you do, it must take an enormous amount of discipline. Do you see that as part of yourself or as part of your training?

If you have a goal, you have to focus and go for it. I never was going to lots of masterclasses or looking left and right for new head joints. Of course you have to be open to new things, you have to be open to be led. You have to dream, to have a vision of what you want to achieve. As a child of nine I was writing poems, writing how I would be a flutist, travelling all over Europe by train... Then comes diligence, but one has to be open to see the path and not get distracted.

I was always very disciplined. My first flute lessons were with a policeman from the marching band of the Amsterdam Police Corps (Jo Mars, a former student of Hubert Barwahser). I was just a little girl and often he came to teach still in his police uniform.

He was always standing behind me with his baton and tapping the rhythms on my shoulder. As a small child you are afraid of police officers, so I was always practising a lot, but I loved the man. But I also practised a lot because I loved the flute.

What drew you to the flute?

My father was a musician, an organ player and conductor. He felt that I was not a chordal instrumental musician, because we had a piano at home and I never felt the urge to sit behind it. My sister did—she played the harp and became a harpist and musicologist. He suggested I try the flute because it is not so difficult and you can quickly play something that is nice. So he gave me a flute but from the first note I was in love. In my first flute lesson, I learned g, a, and b and I could only play, *ha ha ha* (here she mimes blowing with only air coming out). I practised these notes for four hours in a row (laughs)—I was on the floor with stomach pain! But I wanted so much to learn it. So the flute wasn't my choice, but it was a good choice.

My mother is not a musician but always supported me and went to my concerts. I learned a lot from my father because as soon as I could play melodies from age ten or eleven, he took me to the church where he played the organ. During the sermons he would compose a melody for me, which I had to sight-read during the collection. Then he would give me a sign to stop and he would improvise. Then he would say: 'Now an octave higher.' When I was older, things became more complicated and he would say, 'A half tone higher!' And he was then improvising to this melody I played, so I had to keep up. The melodies were not easy, and they were in all different keys. That way I learned about how to prepare music mentally, because I could never practise it, but had to play on the spot and be open for improvising. He was a good teacher. It helped me to open up for new things, thinking: 'What's he going to write this time?' and to strive to meet his standards.

Besides your father and Stockhausen, who else was an influence on your musical life?

When I was ten, my school teacher (who was also learning the flute with the policeman Jo Mars) took me to a concert, 'Franz Vester plays the Golden Flute', at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. Vester played the Bach sonatas, and afterwards I went to his dressing room to get his autograph. That was the moment I knew I wanted to have lessons with this man. When I was eighteen I applied for the conservatory in the Hague, but at that moment Vester had suffered a heart attack and they offered me lessons with other teachers. I said, 'No, I will wait until Vester is healthy again.' In my soul I knew I wanted to study only with this man. After the holidays I had to play for him again because he only wanted to accept one student. At the moment I went into the conservatory to play for him, it was empty, but far away I heard a flute sound so beautiful, that I followed the sound. I didn't know it was him, but I went into the room and it was him, as if I had been led!

I learned music from Vester. He was not interested at all in technique. He never let us play etudes or long tones. He said, 'I don't care if you blow through your nose as long as you have a vision of how it should sound.' For some students, this was difficult. Fortunately, I came to him with good technique, but many others didn't develop technically.

How did the meeting with Stockhausen come about?

At the end of my studies in 1982, Vester told me to prepare the woodwind quintet *Zeitmasze* and the solo works *In Freundschaft* and *Amour* for Stockhausen. Stockhausen was invited with his musicians for thirty days to give masterclasses and every night a different concert at the conservatory. I will never forget the first concert I saw, these people moving on stage without notes, playing everything by heart, wearing beautiful costumes. I was moved to tears at that moment, and thought: 'That's what I want!' I had always dreamed of moving, but my teacher always said: 'Stand still!' When I saw this group of musicians, I thought: 'Yes of course, we have our legs free to move, so to just stand behind this stupid music stand doesn't make sense.' It's always a barrier between you and the audience. I had already played lots of pieces by heart, such as the Bach *Partita* and the Berio *Sequenza*, because I love it when you practise a piece so much that it becomes a part of you, that you get the feeling of 'becoming the music'.



'It's nice to have beautiful movements, which clarify the structure of the piece, or are at least pleasing to look at.' Kathinka Pasveer (alto flute) and Suzanne Stephens (basset horn) perform Stockhausen's *Ave*.

Meeting Stockhausen, it was as if I'd known him all my life. After we worked together in the Conservatory, he phoned me from Germany one week later, telling me that he wanted to write a piece for me, which became *Kathinkas Gesang* for flute and six percussionists, the second scene of the opera *Saturday from Light* which I premiered at the Donaueschingen Festival in October 1983 and which was staged in 1984 at La Scala in Milan. Then one thing led to another and we stayed together for twenty-five years. It's been fantastic, like a fairy tale in many ways.

Stockhausen is known to have said (Texte 10 [1991] page 699) that every performance of music in a way is an opera, even when the composer only cared for the sounds and left everything else to convention. What is your experience of the relationship between music and movement?

I'll never forget a concert I saw as student at the conservatory. Someone performed *Souffle* by Goffredo Petrassi. There were five music stands and I saw only legs moving from one place to the other behind a huge score. That was so ridiculous! Stockhausen always said: 'When I see something, it should be artfully formed.' He performed many of his electronic works in the dark, but whenever he worked with live performers, then the movements would either clarify the music or at least not distract from the music. Often very famous interpreters make stereotypical movements, which are distracting from the music. They don't make sense and then it's better to close your eyes and just listen. But if you have your eyes open, then it's nice to have beautiful movements, which clarify the structure of the piece, or are at least pleasing to look at. For me it was a kind of freedom to move. I notice when people come to the annual Stockhausen Concerts and Courses Kürten to learn to perform these works, they feel so relieved to move and become totally one with the music.

Of course it takes a lot of effort to learn these compositions, but once you have mastered them you have made a big jump. It does take time, which is a luxury. That is one of the goals of the Stockhausen Foundation for Music: to support young musicians who want to learn his music, to take care of food and lodging so that they can concentrate and don't have to think about earning a living for a while.

That is the difficulty with modern music: you invest a lot of time, weeks to learn a piece. Then maybe you say it's not worth it, but still you have tried. Then there are other works where you invest a lot of time and you feel you are growing with the work, and it brings much more than playing the same old music, which you already know from recordings which are played everywhere. So I think music that is composed now is very exciting. How is it that modern people have the latest gadgets, newest computers, newest cars but when it comes to music they are 200 years behind? That's very strange, because the same excitement about new inventions and discoveries should also exist in music.'

Could you say your work has a higher purpose, something behind it, perhaps the idea of beauty?

It is beauty. I have played a lot of modern music, as a student for example with the Xenakis Ensemble, but when I heard the works of Stockhausen I was touched by the beauty, and this beauty not only transforms the player but also transforms the people who listen to it. I am very sure of that.

Helen Bledsoe plays in the internationally acclaimed ensemble *musikFabrik* and teaches at the Hochschule für Künste (Conservatory) in Bremen. In 1996 she won first prize at the International Gaudeamus Competition for contemporary music. In May she will take part in the premiere of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Sunday from Light*. Her teachers have included Peter Lloyd, Kate Lukas, Harrie Starreveld and Robert Dick. Originally from the United States, Helen lives in Cologne with her husband and son. Photograph by Klaus Rudolph.



That is why one has to choose, if possible, what music you want to play, because music is food for the soul. So do you want to feed yourself on bad stuff or good things? As an interpreter one tries to be the perfect instrument for the music, and that includes a certain way of living because you have to stand in front of an audience and give them something. So you have to work on yourself to become a good human being, to become an example in some ways, to have pure thoughts. I think all of that is heard if you are performing. It is a humbling experience to play for the public, because it is a baring of yourself. You give everything of yourself so you should also be sure that you want to share it with other people! That is very important, I think.



Kathinka Pasveer performing Stockhausen's *Paradies*. Photograph by Suzanne Stephens.

And the future?

Now there are so many responsibilities with the Stockhausen Foundation and the Stockhausen Courses Kürten, to help young musicians, and to publish the scores and recordings which have not been published yet. Stockhausen always said 'I just have to die and then it all starts.' And indeed *Klang* was premiered, and his opera *Sunday from Light* will be premiered by the Opera in Cologne in collaboration with *musikFabrik* in May 2011, for which I will prepare the musicians and will do the sound projection in several scenes. *Wednesday from Light* still needs to be premiered, and then all the other operas will come around again, for which we will have to supervise and help people. It sure is a pity, that I have no new pieces to learn any more. Stockhausen's last works with flute, *Paradies* and *Schönheit*, have been premiered and recorded. That is difficult for me because I have always wanted to learn new works, but now it is time for other things. But there is still a lot of repertoire, lots of hours of music, which I have to keep in my system. One notices in time that performing gets less and other things become more important. It has to do with phases in a lifetime: at some point you have to start teaching, to pass on what you have learned in your lifetime. So it is a chance to give to others now.

