

Holy Seriousness in the Play

On symbolism in LICHT

1. *The proportions of the world and astronic humour*

a) A visitor from Sirius: Voltaire's "Micromegas"

In one of Voltaire's philosophical stories, written in 1752, a highly talented young native of the Sirius system sets out on an intergalactic voyage via Saturn to Earth.¹ Voltaire names his Sirian protagonist Micromegas because this, according to Voltaire, is "a most suitable name for men of all statures." The author continues:

He was eight leagues tall, and by eight leagues I mean twenty-four thousand geometrical paces each measuring five feet.

Voltaire hastens to elaborate on this measurement:

Certain algebraists [...] will at once reach for their pen and find that since Mr Micromegas, inhabitant of the land of Sirius, measures twenty-four thousand paces from head to toe, which is the equivalent of one hundred and twenty thousand French feet, and since we, the citizens of the Earth, measure barely five, and since our globe has a circumference of nine thousand leagues, will find, I say, that it necessarily follows that the globe which produced him must be exactly twenty-one million, six hundred thousand times greater in circumference than our little Earth. In nature nothing could be simpler or more commonplace. Comparing the domains of some German or Italian sovereign, which may be compassed in half an hour, with the empires of Turkey, or Muscovy, or China, gives us but a very inadequate picture of the prodigious differences which nature has established between all beings.²

Micromegas' outstanding talents become apparent very early in his life: At the tender age of 250 years – of course, time is as much subject to the author's play of proportions as is space – "he worked out more than fifty of the propositions of Euclid for himself. That is eighteen more than Blaise Pascal..."³ as Voltaire points out in comparison. Since Micromegas "had a marvellous grasp of the laws of gravity and of all the forces of attraction and repulsion",⁴ he can very easily travel through the Milky Way using sunbeams and comets. During a stop on Saturn, a planet less than 900 times larger in size than the Earth, he meets a secretary of the local Academy of Sciences and they continue the journey together. Here Voltaire caricatures

1 Voltaire, "Micromégas. Histoire philosophique" (1752), in Voltaire, *Romans et contes*. Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1979, pp. 19–37, 692–719; English translations in the main text are from: Voltaire, *Candide and Other Stories*, translated by Roger Pearson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

2 Voltaire, *Candide and Other Stories*, p. 101f.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

the writer Bernard de Fontenelle who, with his “Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes” (“Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds”) of 1686, had written an international bestseller of cosmological speculation. Due to his diminutive size of “a mere thousand fathoms or so”, the man from Saturn – as Voltaire continues – may have been a ridiculous sight at first, “rather as an Italian musician starts laughing at Lully’s music when first he comes to France.” However, Voltaire promptly finds an excuse for his protagonist: “But as the Sirian was no fool, he very soon realized that a thinking being may perfectly well not be ridiculous just because he is only six thousand feet tall.”⁵ The two aliens land on the northern shore of the Baltic Sea “on the fifth day of July, in the year seventeen hundred and thirty-seven, new style”,⁶ and immediately begin to search for life. When they use a polished diamond from Micromegas’ necklace as a microscope – the diamond being 2,500 feet in diameter – the galactic visitors discover that the tiny microbe on Micromegas’ fingernail is actually a ship of considerable size with a full crew aboard (whose spectacular wreck the two aliens had caused by accident).

The playful conversation which Voltaire develops in the following short chapters of his story is intended to illustrate that to consider one’s own criterion of size as absolute leads to ignorance and a sense of superiority. Only the opening of the mind to the multitude of possible perspectives and alien proportions enables one to acquire an appropriate understanding of the world. From the Sirian perspective, man has been brought into being by “the hand of the Creator [...] in the abyss of the infinitesimally small”.⁷ Micromegas, however, whose name already embodies the awareness of the active merger of the small and the large, concludes – and the same sentences could have been spoken by Pluramon, the spirit from Hymunion, in Stockhausen’s HYMNEN / ANTHEMS:

I see more than ever that one must not judge anything by its apparent size. O God, who has given intelligence to forms of matter which seem so negligible, the infinitesimally small costs you as little effort as the indefinitely large. And if it is possible that there are beings yet smaller than these, then they may even have greater intelligence than those magnificent animals I have seen in the heavens, whose foot alone would cover this globe on to which I have stepped.⁸

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 108.

7 Ibid., p. 115.

8 Ibid., p. 116. – In his “Rapport sur les prix de vertu” (1934) Paul Valéry writes about the visit of an inhabitant of Sirius in the Académie Française, thus picking up the thread of Voltaire’s story. Valéry describes the sudden apparition of a stranger in his study who wishes to learn something about the meaning of ‘virtue’. This being states that he has come from the extraordinary star which earthlings name ‘Companion of Sirius’ to study life on our planet. He also states that Ernest Renan was highly respected there due to his perspectives about Sirius. Valéry soon realises that the visitor must be an extraterrestrial being such as those invented by Montesquieu and Voltaire in order to be able to write from the point of view of someone who, by his penetrating naiveté, is still able to be deeply astonished about certain aspects of life on earth which her inhabitants no longer appreciate. – P. Valéry, “Rapport sur les prix de vertu”, in *Œuvres I*, ed. by J. Hytier. Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1957, pp. 936–958.

The extreme range of different sizes and proportions of the parts which unite to make up the dynamic whole of nature's living organism is, for Karlheinz Stockhausen, a model for the aggregates of musical forms and courses of the motions in his opera cycle LICHT / LIGHT. During a composition seminar on his work SIRIUS held at the Stockhausen Courses Kürten in 2000, the composer commented that if he were to write a novel he would begin by setting up the exact proportions of his protagonist and later lead him through various encounters with individuals of different proportions. Voltaire's story "Micromégas" provides a small literary model for this, and LICHT, of course, is – in a way – the novel that Stockhausen is working on. The super formula exactly delineates the proportions of his trinomial protagonists and during the seven days of the week he leads them through various encounters with each other and with other forces and figures.

One such encounter forms the theme of the scene MONDEVA in DONNERSTAG / MOON-EVE in THURSDAY. Throughout this central scene, the TIERKREIS / ZODIAC world of SIRIUS is being transformed into the cycle of the days of the week, LICHT.⁹ In this scene, the adolescent Michael encounters Sirisu, a creature from Sirius. This being can appear small as a bird and large as a dinosaur ("LU-NO-OI-SEAU-RI-ER")¹⁰ and recites the name of her twelve-note formula incomprehensibly quickly or incredibly slowly – in contrast to a "normal terrestrial tempo".¹¹ Nevertheless, Michael still would like to "synchronise" with her partially unusual and partially normal proportions (see Ill. 27 and 28, pp. 103–106). What must also be considered here is Stockhausen's linguistically playful use of names: "Sirisu" is, of course, an anagram of Sirius. However, this play with names discloses a number of other meanings: "sir" is the Semitic root of the word "song".¹² Moon-Eve appears as a siren, a bird-like daemon with the power to seduce through music. The third syllable – su – (just as obvious) is the first syllable of the name Suzanne Stephens, who musically embodies this spirit in the work. Maybe it is even possible to single out the syllable "ris" from the name's alchemy as referring to the Latin "risus", thus reading into it the element of laughter and humour which is probably attributable to all characters of the LICHT-cycle. The enormous spreading of segments of the super formula over the length of entire acts and operas could be interpreted as the musical equivalent to the gigantic figures of Micromegas, Gargantua or Gulliver. Prior to all scenic fantasy, the method of formula composition itself – with its simultaneity of "human" formats and over-sized dimensions, together with the almost impossible task of the listeners to synchronise themselves with this – may in itself be the root of the substantial humour of this music.

9 Cf. Dettloff Schwerdtfeger, *Karlheinz Stockhausens Oper DONNERSTAG aus LICHT. Ziel und Anfang einer kompositorischen Entwicklung*. Kürten: Stockhausen-Stiftung für Musik, 2000.

10 Score of MICHAEL'S YOUTH. Kürten: Stockhausen-Verlag, 1983, p. M 3.

11 Ibid., p. M 10: "im normalen Erdzeitempo".

12 Alfons Rosenberg, *Engel und Dämonen. Gestaltwandel eines Urbildes*. Munich: Prestel, 1967, p. 30.