

Catherine Christer Hennix
Unbegrenzt (1974)

“Unbegrenzt” from *Aus Den Sieben Tagen*

Catherine Christer Hennix
Recitation, Percussion and Electronic
Sounds from Tape

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Gong

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Text

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Cover image
Goran Freese, Catherine Christer Hennix
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rehearsal, Stockholm, 1974.

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My only direct interaction with Karlheinz Stockhausen was in the summer of 2002, at his vanity courses in Kürten, in the thick of the then still ongoing sprawl of his *Licht* cycle. That experience of the late “Meister” in full self-aggrandizing guru mode left such a grotesque impression that my turning to think of Catherine Christer Hennix’s 1974 realization of Stockhausen’s 1968 composition “Unbegrenzt,” from *Aus den Sieben Tagen*, couldn’t help but be paranoiastically charged—nervous. Listening to Stockhausen’s own recording, made in 1969, just five years before Hennix’s, I kept wondering if the two recordings were really *that* different? Was the difference just in a choice between flavors of European asyntax? And what about my own *need* for these recordings to be different? If Hennix’s conception of her realization had in no way been “critical” at the time, was I just projecting? But then I remembered the tone of disgusted dismissal in Hennix’s voice around 2011, when her “Unbegrenzt” recording was on the brink of release from another record label: “Not thinking is death!” She was talking generally about Stockhausen’s “intuitive music”—his conceptual framework for pieces like “Unbegrenzt”—versus her own concept of “intuitionistic music,” a music grounded in L.E.J. Brouwer’s notion of time, and more specifically, about other pieces in the *Aus den Sieben Tagen* cycle, such as “Staubgold” and “Es.” Hennix had been careful from the get-go to separate her appreciation of *Aus den Sieben Tagen* (the prospect of which she saw as a productive development of and beyond La Monte Young’s event scores) from their author’s framing of the work as “intuitive music.” The score for “Es” reads: “Think NOTHING / Wait until it is absolutely still within you / When you have attained this / begin to play / As soon as you start to think, stop / and try to retain / the state of NON-THINKING / Then continue playing.” If Hennix’s aim in realizing Stockhausen’s score was to “take him to another place,” her realization itself—the seriousness with which Hennix, et al., attended to the score (arguably more seriously than the composer himself took it)—does indeed (and audibly) do just that, but so far elsewhere that it becomes incompatible with the composer’s own conceptual framework. *Not thinking is death* very precisely announces a gulf that is nothing short of paradigmatic—between notions of mind, notions of and relations to “self.” But I’m getting a bit ahead of myself.

As the anecdote goes, a lovesick Karlheinz conceives *Aus den Sieben Tagen* in a Parisian apartment, in May ‘68, oblivious to the outside, after being dumped by Mary Bauermeister. Put another way: Stockhausen sublimates fragile masculinity into cognitive fascism, a.k.a. “intuitive music.” It’s almost funny just how obvious this all *sounds* in the 1969 Stockhausen recordings—how overwhelmingly trope-y their realizations are. And not just the usual post-war avant-garde tropes, but full on orientalisms (including bamboo flutes, “Indian bells,” tablas), a disavowed

gesturing toward free and creative musics of the time that verges on musical blackface, and Stockhausen himself as Brad Pitt in *Seven Years in Tibet* declaiming his guru’s profundities about universality, higher and lower levels of being, and the prospect of heightened power... Equally or more fascinating is how Stockhausen’s authorization of “intuitive music” as explicitly *against*¹ extant improvised musics follows the textbook trajectory of othering. Stockhausen: “I don’t want some spiritistic sitting—I want music! I don’t mean something mystical, but rather everything completely direct, from concrete experience.”² Intuitive music rationalizes intuition, or rather, claims to. It cannibalizes and colonizes improvisation, projecting and proclaiming that irrationality is elsewhere, in an outside, allowing itself to blindly role-play precisely that outside which it seeks to disavow. “Play a sound / with the certainty / that you have an infinite amount of time and space.” Do white men ever *assume* otherwise? Therein seems to be the crux of the problem: the impenetrable notion of mind / subject / self that is certain of its entitlement to infinity and yet which must structurally defend against the infinite as something necessarily exceeding its paranoiastically clenched identity. The imagined universalization of this self in the conception of both composer and imagined performer throughout *Aus den Sieben Tagen* (the self-same “You” addressed in the score’s instructional prose) preemptively forecloses the emergence of difference in the very name of difference. As such, “intuitive music” is also necessarily a music without listener. Listening, the taking in of an outside, exposure to emergence, or susceptibility (as Fumi Okiji might say), is something that must be aggressively banished to reach the “power” of the “universal mind” of the “higher plane.” All parties in the interpretive encounter must be active, impervious individuals.

Hennix, on the other hand, as a consummate Lacanian (even if her “Unbegrenzt” predates the “practice of the unconscious” she’ll take up in the decades to come), has a radically different relation to receptivity and the irrational. Through that, her “response” to Stockhausen is not one of rational-discursive critique, but of beating him at his own game. Hennix’s realization of “Unbegrenzt” is hyper- or rather über-modernist: she takes the German composer’s hollow gesturing toward transformation (hollow in so far as Stockhausen is incapable of articulation that would do anything but reiterate self-identity through ever more intimate extraction) and follows it to something unknown—into contingency. Which is to say: she listens. She probes the space of the score such that it facilitates an opening into something

else. Which is to say: her recording is *more* asyntactical, *more* meaningless, *more* nonsensical, and certainly *far less* “enjoyable” than Stockhausen’s—less unconsciously possessed by a vocabulary of tropes and thus less recognizable, identifiable. By turning the technical modernist arsenal of observation / objectification in all its pseudo-totality (a.k.a. white listening) on itself, the possibility of encountering something paradigmatically outside the rigid filters of its gaze is suddenly possible. Unlike a sonically relational—devotional—work such as *The Electric Harpsichord*, presented just a few years later (which refers directly to extant disciplines of musical psychotropism), the modernistic-ness of Hennix’s “Unbegrenzt” recording might also be described as without an outside. What is “discovered” in the indeterminate encounter of her performance is indeed *not* an outside “otherness,” but instead an internal heterogeneity—“an other” within, non-identity in (as) self. A discovery that undoes the ground of its own inquiry. “Science,” when applied “objectively” / strictly to itself (i.e., when it is more than a megalomaniacal masturbatory pose as in so much work of the post-war avant-garde), reveals its own dissolution, reveals its status as also pure and absolute violence—force.

The receptivity then which Hennix discovers in her apothotic realization of this apothotic High Modernist work, a receptivity to paradigmatic difference, to the fundamental and constitutive *disorder* of the self as such, is a receptivity that conceptually clears the way to the infra-historical sonic lineages that so much of Hennix’s later work will trace. Insofar as her recording of “Unbegrenzt” is decisively distinct from that work, it persists in feeling and sounding distinctly more “negative” than that which came immediately before and that which will soon follow. If there would be a pleasure to be had here, it would be in something like a psychedelia of inner disorder. That in listening to it, in entraining to its droningly specific incoherence, we’re also undone. Or perhaps that’s too easy. Perhaps the pleasure would be masochistic: that in *not* enjoying but enduring it we’re forced to un-heroically face the sounds of our own assertive self-identity, sounds we didn’t even know were holding us in place, the internalized measures against which sonic pleasure is unconsciously adjudicated. Which would be to say: Hennix’s “Unbegrenzt” functions as an experiential asterisk, a sonic caveat. To listen and be transformed, in the ways her other work offers and demands, is quite literally impossible from the subject position that a figure like Stockhausen occupies. The foundational assumption about what one as a listening subject “is” in Hennix’s work implies a radically antagonistic relation to identity, self, and world.

—Bill Dietz

1 Henry Flynt (in his 1964 “Action Against Cultural Imperialism” leaflet) reports Stockhausen having declared in 1958 at Harvard, “jazz is primitive... barbaric... beat and a few simple chords... garbage...”

2 As quoted by Fred Ritzel in his entry on “Musik für ein Haus” in the *Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik* 12 (Mainz: Schott, p. 15).