



1969: Stories into Music

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In the winter of 1969, Karlheinz Stockhausen, the German composer and electronic music pioneer, and John Lennon, then still of the Beatles, agreed to meet in New York City to plan a joint concert of their music. The pairing seemed unlikely, but in fact the two admired each other's work, with the Beatles putting Stockhausen's photo on the cover of their Sgt. Pepper's album and Stockhausen calling Lennon the century's most important mediator between popular and serious music. Over time the two men had struck up a correspondence and, according to Stockhausen, frequently spoke on the telephone. But on the appointed day, New York was struck by a deadly blizzard. Stockhausen showed up at the meeting



Luciano Berio, John Lennon, and Karlheinz Stockhausen (on-screen during a performance of *1969* at Carnegie Hall) courted scorn with compositions reflecting their political beliefs. (Photo by Hiroyuki Ito for the *New York Times*.)

place; Lennon, assuming no one in his right mind would travel in the storm, did not. The two would never meet.

Four decades later, the missed connection would become the germ of *1969*, a concert-theater piece about music and politics in the 1960s, and about how in pushing against social and artistic convention, composers would come to write their life stories in their work. At first glance, the storytelling nature of their music is easier to imagine for someone like Lennon. We take for granted that personal history seeps into popular songs; indeed, we will sift the lyrics for clues to the songwriters' lives. But autobiography can inform even the most astringent compositions of the 20th century classical avant-garde.

In conceiving the show, we chose a form that would coax out the connections between life and work. Co-created and staged by the new-music ensemble Alarm Will Sound, *1969* is a multimedia piece, with dialogue voiced over live and recorded music as archival video and photographs are projected onscreen. The words are those of the composers whose music we feature – Stockhausen, Lennon, Yoko Ono, Paul McCartney, Luciano Berio, and Leonard Bernstein – and of others in their circle, including politicians, critics, and colleagues, with text drawn from writings, speeches, newspaper articles, biographical accounts, record covers, interviews, and letters. Woven together, these strands become scenes showing how musicians from each side of the classical/popular music divide influenced one another and struggled to define the responsibility of the artist in an era of political calamity. The Vietnam War, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the election of Richard Nixon were all events that would inspire the composers' art and would sometimes be their prime motivation. The music is inseparable from personal history, partly a creature of outrage, partly the confessional.

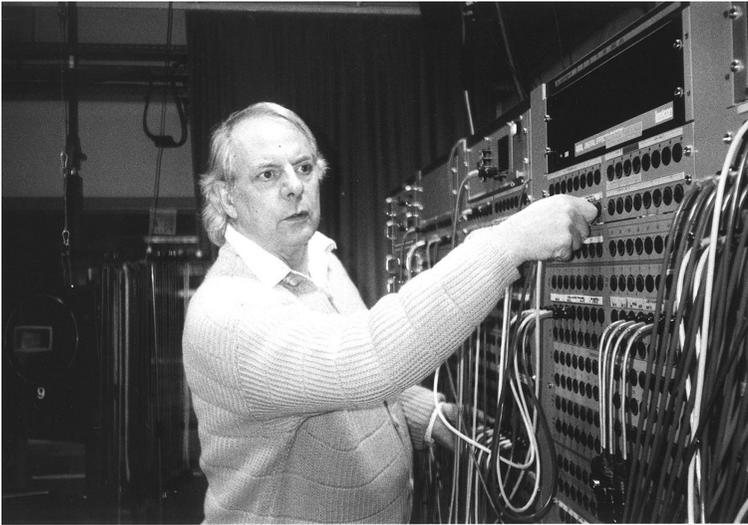
These works are also the creations of musicians who changed by straying from their accustomed forms, often in tandem with upheavals in their lives. Berio made his own arrangements of some of the Beatles' songs; Bernstein incorporated elements of rock music and jazz in his scores; the Beatles adopted the tape loops and electronic bleeps and distortions of the classical avant-garde; Stockhausen pushed beyond strictly defined melody, structure, and meter in his compositions and introduced chance in their performance.

1969's creators and performers got to share in the newness and discomfort, which in a way helped underline the show's transformational themes. My job with the show was scriptwriter. As a journalist, I was comfortable with gathering material and synthesizing a story from it, but the constraint of using found language was a new challenge, obliging me to tell the story with unavoidable gaps in the text. But those disjunctions, along with the

layering of media, forced the audience to make interpretive leaps that immersed them in the creative froth of the composers and the real-life drama that flowed into the music. The staging of the show brings home the message, too. Professional actors play only three of the many characters. Most of the dialogue is spoken, from memory, by the 20 members of the ensemble – classically trained musicians with no acting experience. Yet much of the power of the performance comes from the fact that the voices of the characters emerge from the orchestra; that is, the stories of the protagonists come, quite literally, from the music. So just as the lives of the composers became part of their work, so does the telling of how they told their stories.

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THE PUTATIVE MEETING BETWEEN LENNON AND STOCKHAUSEN turned out to be a perfect metaphor for the 1960s, with the decade’s brew of idealism, loss, and missed opportunities, and we used it as a leitmotif. The performance begins with the two men presenting slide shows of their lives, revealing at the outset that their personal histories would be the tale they would tell as musicians. The similarities between the two were striking. Both had been left by their mothers, Lennon’s giving him up to the care of an aunt, Stockhausen’s descending into mental illness and ending up in an asylum; both mothers were killed when their sons were still young, Lennon’s run down by a drunk driver, Stockhausen’s, as he would



Stockhausen (here recording “Friday” from *Licht* in his studio in 1994) blended electronic and acoustic music. (Photo by Kathinka Pasveer.)

later put it, “euthanized by the Nazis as a useless eater.” Both men would go on to have complicated romantic lives, Stockhausen having a long domestic arrangement with two women simultaneously and Yoko Ono instigating a liaison between Lennon and her personal assistant.

Both also found inspiration for their work in personal crises and political beliefs, and were pilloried for it. Stockhausen conceived his choral work *Stimmung* (“tuning”) after he came home one day to discover that his wife had left him. He vowed that he would starve himself to death. On his fourth day without food, he opened the piano and played a single note; it was, he said, like the first note of his entire life, and he decided to keep on living. He called his greatest composition from the period – *Hymnen* (“anthems”) – “a music of all countries” for a time of global strife. *Hymnen* was a groundbreaking work, remarkable for its sweep and novelty, audaciously combining recorded and live elements. But the piece was greeted with harsh reviews – “simplistic and naive,” declared a *New York Times* reviewer, an impenetrable *mélange* of “fractured phrases” – and at least some of the scorn seemed related to the sort of people attending the premiere: “The most interesting thing about the Stockhausen program was the audience,” wrote another *Times* critic. “There was long hair; there were miniskirts and hot pants; there were bearded boys in sweaters and denims; there was even a suspicious odor that sort of resembled tobacco.”



Lennon and Yoko Ono are recording “Give Peace a Chance” at a 1969 bed-in in Montreal. At center foreground is psychologist and LSD enthusiast Timothy Leary. (Photo by Roy Kerwood.)

At around the same time, in one of the first examples of celebrity activism, Lennon and Yoko Ono took advantage of their place in the spotlight to campaign for peace, staging “bed-ins,” in which they invited the press to observe them lying in bed surrounded by political placards as they spoke about the Vietnam War. They also appeared on television shrouded in giant bags, symbolizing facelessness. It was then that they released *Unfinished Music*, an experimental album for which Ono was the driving force. While created in the spirit of making new sounds, *Unfinished Music* helped Lennon underscore his break with the Beatles, and the album was very much intertwined with the romance between its creators. The couple recorded the music alone, in one night, and, Lennon said, they became lovers as the sun rose, “right there in that little studio.” The record cover showed them standing side-by-side, nude, photographed head-on for the front of the album and from the rear for the back. *Unfinished Music* was a wildly discordant mix of acoustic and electronic sounds and yowling vocals. The reviews were withering. “An ego trip of two rich waifs,” wrote a critic in *Rolling Stone*, “equaled by precocious teenagers with tape recorders everywhere.”

Leonard Bernstein’s career followed a similar arc of struggle, success, and reversal. As a child, he had a difficult relationship with his father, a businessman, who hated the idea that his son might become a



The election of Richard Nixon, pictured here at his inauguration, was a flashpoint for artists. (Photo by Alarm Will Sound.)

musician. But Bernstein learned to play the piano by ear on an instrument given to the family by an aunt, and he raised money for formal studies by giving lessons to neighborhood children. He proved to be a musical Renaissance man, gifted as composer, conductor, and pianist. As conductor of the New York Philharmonic, Bernstein was a champion of Stockhausen and Berio, premiering important works of both composers, and he lived in the same Manhattan apartment building as Lennon; he had the Beatles in mind when he declared the popular music of the 1960s to be “more adventurous than anything being written in serious music today.”



Leonard Bernstein (left) and his wife Felicia, with Black Panther Field Marshal Don Cox, hosted a party in 1970 to raise legal funds for the Panthers. (Photo by Steve Salmieri for *New York* magazine.)



Bernstein (played by Michael Harley, singing from *Mass*), was urged to give voice to his convictions by radical Catholic priest Daniel Berrigan, who was jailed for burning draft board records. (Photo by Alarm Will Sound.)

Bernstein was a gregarious man and politically engaged. He was despondent over the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King and the war in Vietnam. Jacqueline Kennedy, a friend and a supporter of the arts, asked him to conduct the mass for Robert Kennedy's funeral, and Bernstein would play an active role in the 1968 presidential campaign. He later befriended Daniel Berrigan, a radical Catholic priest who was jailed for burning draft records in an antiwar protest. When Bernstein visited him in prison, Berrigan advised him to funnel his beliefs into his music. What ensued was *Mass*, a stylistically eclectic rock-inflected work intended as an indictment of the religious and political establishments for their complacency in the face of war. *Mass* was a deliberate provocation, by turns generous, naive, stirring, and overwrought, and its gestation was not easy. The musical theater composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim, asked for his opinion on an early draft, wondered if Bernstein might translate the script into Latin "so you wouldn't have to listen to the words." After the premiere, the critic of the *New York Times* declared it the work of a composer "who desperately wants to be with it." Perhaps in the same vein, Bernstein also hosted a benefit in his apartment to raise money for the legal defense fund of the Black Panthers, several of whom

were on trial for murder. An editorial in the *New York Times* declared it “the sort of elegant slumming that degrades patrons and patronized alike.” Bernstein’s daughter later said that he never completely recovered from the reaction.

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IN THE FIRST VERSION OF 1969, which premiered in 2009, Luciano Berio was the odd man out. He was a man of prodigious intellect, charm, appetite, and temper, and he had a domestic life that was every bit as complicated as that of the other composers in the show, involving family vacations that included an ex-wife, to the exasperation of the current one. He was a focal point of the Italian avant-garde, co-founding the Studio di Fonologia, an electronic music studio, in Milan with Bruno Maderna and collaborating on cross-genre projects with Umberto Eco, John Cage, and other prominent artists. He was also engaged with the popular music world, teaching the bassist Phil Lesh, who would become a mainstay of the Grateful Dead, and famously meeting Paul McCartney in London; the two would exchange ideas on tradecraft.



Paul McCartney (left) says he attended a 1966 lecture by Luciano Berio (right, with journalist Barry Miles) at the Italian Cultural Institute in London “to get ideas.” (Photo from *In the Sixties* by Barry Miles)

In relation to the events of the day, though, Berio seemed to float above the fray. On music and musicians, he was happy to play the role of *éminence grise*, offering blisteringly frank critiques of his colleagues and

writing eloquently about the role and duties of the composer. And his piece *Sinfonia* was an essential work for 1969. One of the great compositions of that year, it included a text – borrowed largely from Beckett, augmented by some graffitied slogans from the 1968 Paris uprising – that perfectly fit our themes. But on his personal view of the world’s tumultuous politics, on the motivation for his music, and especially on how his life’s story informed his compositions, he was a cipher, and the absence left the show feeling unresolved.

Until, that is, in revising the script, I stumbled upon an incident and a lost work that brought him into focus. In the early 1960s, Berio won a commission from the Library of Congress to compose a chamber piece that would be performed in Washington. He was just about to move to Oakland, California, for a teaching sojourn at Mills College. While he was in California, Berio discovered American politics, which, in the 1960s, meant the politics of race. He was riveted by the televised Congressional debates over the Civil Rights Act and by the speeches of Martin Luther King. He also discovered African-American music when friends took him to Sunday gospel services in Oakland’s Baptist churches. By the time he began to work on his commission, he had abandoned the idea of composing a woodwind quintet, as the Library expected, and decided instead to write a one-act chamber opera, called *Traces*. His subject: racial conflict. The libretto was polemical, confrontational, and scatological, and the casting specified a large, all-black chorus, half of whom were to appear in whiteface.

Berio submitted a draft to the Library. The director of the Library’s commissioning program expressed his surprise at Berio’s change of plan and wrote to the composer that the Library could not stage the work. Berio offered to make whatever changes the Library wished. The director responded that no alterations could conceivably render the piece suitable for performance at the Library, no doubt mindful of how official Washington would react to an inflammatory work at a time when Congress was debating its signature civil rights legislation. Berio finished the piece to satisfy the terms of the commission and collect his fee. Shortly after sending in the final draft, he realized that he had not kept a copy of the score and asked if he could borrow it. The Library refused but offered to duplicate it, for a stiff fee. Berio walked away in disgust. *Traces* went into the archives. And there it would lay, long presumed lost, for more than 40 years – until a scholar from Yale University found it, photographed it, and gave a copy to us. 1969 contains excerpts from this work, performed for the first time. The Washington fracas explains Berio’s oblique approach to politically charged material later in his career. In his aria “O King,” part of *Sinfonia*, he concealed his subject until the very end of the piece, when, after singing

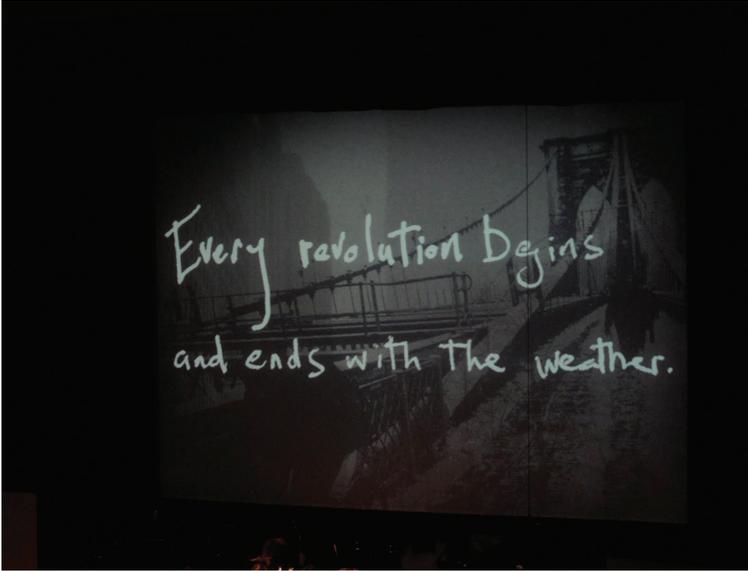


Berio composed *O King* to honor the slain civil rights leader, but only revealed his subject with the song's last words. (Photo by Alarm Will Sound.)

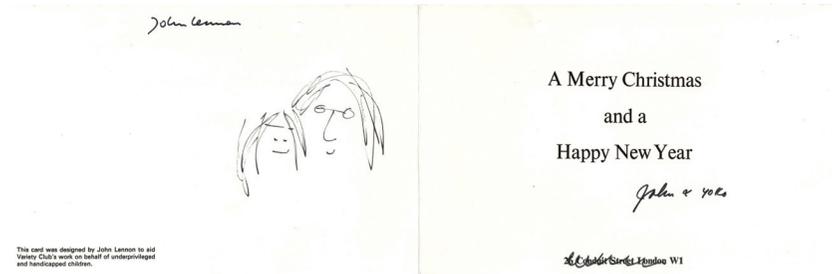
a string of unintelligible syllables, the soprano finishes with the words “Martin Luther King.” Berio had learned to deliver his message by stealth.

Consciously or otherwise, all of the composers in 1969 had much to say not just about music and art but also about the events that shaped their lives; all suffered professionally for their pains. But in telling their stories, in their conversations with one another, in their attempt to grapple with the events of the day, they created works of tremendous originality that both changed the course of music and answered the question that Berio posed in his writings and his *Sinfonia*: If music can't stop the wars or lower the price of bread, what, then, is a composer to do?

And yet even when they spoke of their own lives, the truth could be elusive. In the course of my research, I approached Yoko Ono with the account of the planned meeting between Stockhausen and Lennon and asked if she had any correspondence from the German composer to her husband. She responded that she had no letters, and that none existed; although the two men were aware of one another, she said, they had never corresponded or spoken on the telephone or communicated directly in any way, and they had never planned to meet; she wished us good luck on our project. Shortly thereafter, the curators of the Stockhausen archive in Germany sent me an image of a Christmas card Stockhausen had received four decades ago. It was hand-drawn by John Lennon, and signed by John and Yoko.



The philosopher Theodor Adorno might have been writing about the Blizzard of '69, which snowed out a meeting between John Lennon and Karlheinz Stockhausen in New York City. (Photo illustration by Alarm Will Sound.)



Lennon sent this hand-drawn Christmas card to his friend Stockhausen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Kupfer is a writer and editor in New York. Alarm Will Sound has performed *1969* in New York, Denver, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, St. Louis, and other cities around the United States. The ensemble is now seeking support to bring the show to Europe.