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**Book Review:**

**Ivana Medić, *Theory and Practice of Gesamtkunstwerk in the 20th and 21st Centuries – Karlheinz Stockhausen's Operatic Cycle LIGHT / LICHT*, 2019.**

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**Ivana Medić**

***Theory and Practice of  
Gesamtkunstwerk in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>  
Centuries – Karlheinz Stockhausen’s  
Operatic Cycle LIGHT / LICHT***

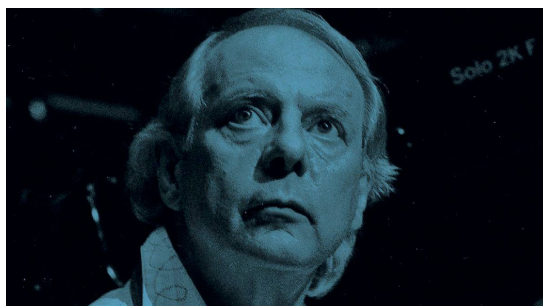
**Belgrade: Institute of Musicology SASA, 2019.**

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In the book *Theory and Practice of Gesamtkunstwerk in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries – Karlheinz Stockhausen’s Operatic Cycle LIGHT / LICHT* Ivana Medić upholds the idea that *total artwork* or *Gesamtkunstwerk* is a golden thread that connects Richard Wagner, Alexander Scriabin, Arnold Schoenberg and lastly, Karlheinz Stockhausen. To the author’s knowledge, very few publications in the Serbian language can be found that address the Stockhausen’s work in this comprehensive manner and with this vigor. Medić takes an innovative approach to the complex and challenging subject of the book, constructing an intricate theoretical apparatus that allows her to approach *Gesamtkunstwerk* and observe it to a great extent in various lighting. Notably, the theoretical apparatus consists of interpretation of *Gesamtkunstwerk* using the key of romanticism and modernism, as well as the theory of avantgarde in art and, particularly, that of musical avantgarde. The apparatus is also built on the knowledge from various disciplines such as literature studies, history of theatre, theatre studies and other discourses that greatly influenced the evolution

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Ivana Medić  
**TEORIJA I PRAKSA  
 GESAMTKUNSTWERKA  
 U XX I XXI VEKU**  
 Operski ciklus  
 SVETLOST / LICHT  
 Karlhajncza Štokhauzenna



  
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of *total artwork* and helped the author underline the multifacetedness of the said concept.

This book is a natural extension of the author's interest in Gesamtkunstwerk and her fascination with Stockhausen's work (fascination that was prompted by the composer's pieces and concept of *intuitive music*, and lasts to this day). Actively researching and documenting her findings regarding the two subjects, Ivana Medić wrote several papers and publications<sup>2</sup> during the course of her research that ultimately resulted in union of the two in this book. A fact worth mentioning is the author's active participation in *The Stockhausen Composition and Interpretation Courses* in Kürten organized by the *Stockhausen Foundation for Music* (*Stockhausen-Stiftung für Musik*). During these summer courses, Medić had the opportunity to inter-

view and work with Stockhausen and his associates and had access to scores, audio, and video recordings as well as published and unpublished texts on the development of *Licht*. The analytical part of the book, dedicated to Stockhausen's *Licht*, stems from these experiences, a fact that, in itself, enriches this publication.

This book is separated into two parts. The first part deals with the sources and predecessors of Gesamtkunstwerk as an idea, the predecessors of Wagner's theory and practice of Gesamtkunstwerk. After that, the author dedicates pages to the evolution of Gesamtkunstwerk, Alexander Scriabin's *Mysterium* and Arnold Schoenberg's *Die glückliche Hand*, as well as the development and status of Gesamtkunstwerk in the interwar period. The second part of the book is dedicated to Karlheinz Stockhausen and his monumental cycle *Licht*, a piece of cosmic-ritual theatre. A fine addition to this book are the interviews the reader can find in the appendix – one with Stockhausen that took place in Kürten during the summer courses and one with his assistant and associate, composer and musicologist Richard Toop.

Medić explains that there are two types of theoretical and practical approaches to Gesamtkunstwerk: the former follows the line of a "particular need for synthesis of arts or media and is focused primarily on the art world" (66). The latter follows

<sup>2</sup> Visit Ivana Medić's website for more information on this book and other publications: <http://ivanamedic.com/publications/>

the “utopic vision of creation of the new universe or linking of the arts with the other systems and is focused on the ideological background of the project” (66). Her criteria for identifying a work as Gesamtkunstwerk are the following: in the formal sense, the work needs to be created as a synthesis of as many arts/media as possible; as an idea, the work should connote archaic and/or transcendental utopian project; the artist that is creating Gesamtkunstwerk must be in continuity with the image of the romantic-era creator; the work must possess a certain mimetic quality (68–69). These defined qualities influenced Medić’s choice of composers that fulfilled the abovementioned criteria and approached Wagner’s legacy in a different manner, respectively (69). She also explains that every theatrical work was followed by a theoretical explanation in the form of multitude of autopoetical texts of its creator.

With Gesamtkunstwerk, there is more than meets the eye. Addressing the philosophical origins, ideological background, the status of art and artists and thoroughly documenting the evolution of this concept in the interwar period, Medić recognizes one fascinating key moment that took place during the development of Gesamtkunstwerk, particularly, the transformation of this concept into a sociopolitical utopia that took place mainly in German speaking areas and in Russia (129). The evolution of this concept was affected by the changes in an understanding of the elements that constitute the idea of *total artwork*, as the author points out (55). Equally important is the formation of new theatrical forms and genres (132) and the establishment of continuity with the projects from the beginning of 20th Century, the continuity that was broken by the outbreak of World War II. Medić recognizes this tendency towards continuity in the work of Karlheinz Stockhausen and agrees with Mladen Dolar’s claim that the composers who are *classics of contemporary music* had an urge to crown their achievements with an opera, the *ultimate genre*.<sup>3</sup>

Medić underlines the often overlooked and forgotten (even deliberately ignored) fact that Stockhausen’s mystically driven visions of global understanding and togetherness have their roots in his experiences as a war orphan. Those experiences fueled his desire to find spiritual strength in Catholicism, New Age ideas and teachings, Zen Buddhism, various religious scrolls, Urantia book etc. and understood that he is one of the enlightened Ones (much like Scriabin and Schoenberg) who have the responsibility thrust upon them – a role Stockhausen is willing to accept (153, 206). Be that as it may, Stockhausen religiously followed his stellar vision manifested in the opera cycle *Licht* and thoroughly documented his path towards realization of this vision. Medić argues that there is a particular incompatibility between Stockhausen’s understanding of theory and practice of Gesamtkunstwerk with the postmodern techniques he used. As she explains, Stockhausen used postmodern techniques (primarily citation of various textual sources and virtual signs) contrary to their intended use in order to achieve his ultimate goal: unity and spiritual progress of the human race (204). She further elaborates that Stockhausen based his philosophy on the spiritual movement of New Age (203) and the ideas of unification and

<sup>3</sup> Mladen Dolar in: Ibid, 132.

spiritual progress humanity should undertake in the Age of Aquarius. Additionally, she finds that Stockhausen's compositional thought gives an impression of a revived avantgarde musical thought in the postmodern era. Although Stockhausen's pieces carry hallmarks of modernism, he demonstrated that Gesamtkunstwerk is possible in the postmodern era (205–206).

Medić's comprehensive, thought-provoking monograph gives clear answers to numerous questions that arise when one is encountered with Gesamtkunstwerk and, particularly, with the multilayeredness of Stockhausen's complex work. This monograph provides an excellent starting point for any researcher who is determined to grasp the idea of Gesamtkunstwerk fully and any researchers who are interested in viewing Stockhausen's works in a different light.

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