

WIGMORE HALL 125

Friday 5 June 2026
10.00pm

Wigmore Hall 125th Anniversary Festival

The Anniversary Festival is supported by the 1901 Patrons' Circle and Cockayne Grants for the Arts, a Donor Advised Fund, held at The Prism Charitable Trust

London Voices

Joanna Forbes L'Estrange soprano

Alison Ponsford-Hill soprano

Heather Cairncross alto

Richard Eteson tenor

Ben Parry bass

Nicholas Garrett bass

Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928-2007)

Stimmung (1968)

Please note this programme contains adult content which may not be suitable for younger listeners.



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Stimmung has always been a work to inspire a strong reaction. At the Dutch premiere in 1969, it caused an uproar. It was a week into the Holland Festival and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw had scheduled a Stockhausen double bill with the composer himself conducting. The first piece went off without a hitch. But 20 minutes into the new work, a disruption could be heard from the audience. Several people 'started a comic imitation,' Stockhausen later complained, 'making somewhat similar sounds to those of the singers, then meowing or barking like cats and dogs.' Incensed, he ordered his musicians to stop the performance and stormed off. A 'crowd of young people' then rushed onto the stage and grabbed the now-abandoned microphones. Pandemonium ensued. The weekly paper *Vrij Nederland* called it 'The greatest "scandal" in the eighty-year history of this temple of the muses.'

Yet at its heart *Stimmung* is a love song. At the start of April 1967, Stockhausen was in California. He was living in an apartment in Sausalito, teaching at the University of California, Davis, taking regular trips into nearby San Francisco to present his music at concerts and public lectures. The Human Be-In had just taken place in Golden Gate Park and the pavements of Haight-Ashbury were full of kaftans, the scent of patchouli oil wafting down the street. Members of the Grateful Dead came to watch Stockhausen speak. At the Fillmore West auditorium, Stockhausen himself went to see the Jefferson Airplane. In a few weeks' time, his photo would appear, nuzzled between Lenny Bruce and WC Fields, on the cover of The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. All of a sudden, the once-austere looking avatar of integral serialism and *elektronische Musik* was an icon of the counterculture. But Stockhausen had other things on his mind. He was about to get married.

In poems written at that time, he spoke of drinking 'through the round vowel "u" / which kisses your nipples all night long.' On 2 April, he married the artist Mary Bauermeister. Their son Simon was born two months later. With their new baby, the two newlyweds moved to a house by the waterside in Madison, Connecticut, and the score for *Stimmung* was written there, over February and March 1968. But its spoken words are drawn largely from the poems written in what Stockhausen would later call 'love-bitten times' that previous spring in northern California.

It was a cold winter. As he composed, Stockhausen stared out over the frozen veneer of Long Island Sound. 'There were unbelievably strong winds,' he later recalled, 'and I just watched the white snow on the water in front of my two windows. That was the only landscape I really saw during the composition of the piece.' He had to keep quiet because his nine-month-old child was sleeping in the next room, so he took to humming with his head pressed against the wall, changing the shape of his mouth as he did so, feeling

the overtones resonate through the structure of the house, with the muffled gurgling of the baby coming back to him, as if in response. It would be Stockhausen's first work for unaccompanied voice since he was a student. But *Stimmung* is no ordinary chorale. Throughout, the singing is quiet, almost a murmur (albeit mic'd up), and completely lacking in vibrato. For the English conductor, Paul Hillier, it 'completely refashioned the very idea of what a vocal ensemble might do and be.'

If the origin story of the work suggests an image of snug domesticity, that is reflected in the title. In German, *Stimmung* can refer to 'intonation', the process of 'tuning up' or 'tuning in'. But it can also mean something like 'mood', 'temperament', 'feeling'. Johann Gottfried Herder once wrote that 'Each human being has his own measure [Stimmung], as it were an accord peculiar to him of all his feelings to each other.' The Italian critic Mario Praz defined 'Stimmung' as 'the sense of intimacy' particular to a place or a building: its cosiness. Language is important to Stockhausen. Alongside the love poems spoken during performance, the work is also punctuated by the pronouncement of several 'magic names': Vishnu, Hera, Elohim, Ahura-Mazda – names of gods from cultures all over the world, compiled for the composer by the anthropologist Nancy Wyle who he had met in California the previous year.

Originally commissioned by Collegium Vocale, an ensemble from Cologne founded by students at the Rheinische Musikschule, the work was premiered in Paris at the Maison de la Radio on the 9 December 1968. Max Ernst, Dorothea Tanning and Pierre Souvchinsky were in attendance. The singers sat cross-legged in a circle, barefoot, wearing brightly coloured clothes. The French press compared it to a 'hippies' camp fire'. But for Ben Parry, director of London Voices, *Stimmung* deserves to be seen as more than just a relic of the Swinging Sixties. 'I feel it's timeless,' he told me, when we spoke recently via Zoom.

Parry has a long history with the work, having first performed the piece with Singcircle some decades ago, later with his own ensemble Dunedin Consort (co-founded with Susan Hamilton), before joining London Voices, who first performed the piece at the Aldeburgh Festival in 2008. After another performance at King's College Chapel in 2015, he was approached by an audience member. 'I haven't heard this piece before,' the woman said, 'but I have heard music like this. I was in a Norwegian forest in the middle of the night and I heard this music in the air.'

'Everything has a resonance,' Parry concluded. 'There are natural overtones in every sound.'

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