

On Screen

Films & DVDs



When There Is No More Music To Write, And Other Roman Stories

Éric Baudelaire (Director)

Poulet-Malassis 2022, 59 mins

"We are all some kind of walking experiment," says composer Alvin Curran. On screen a figure dangles from a hang-glider, confronting risk, experiencing exhilaration. Earlier in Éric Baudelaire's film, Curran recalls his relocation from America to his new home in Rome. Out of his element, he found himself as a young man in a situation where everything seemed at once possible and impossible. This image of a human individual in flight reverberates with Curran's ambivalence, as he faced the thrill of the unknown and felt the anxiety of disorientation.

Soon after his arrival in the ancient city in the mid-1960s, fellow musician Franco Evangelisti had shocked Curran with the question, "Don't you know that there is no more music to write?" Contemporary

composition was an angry, dissonant reaction to the devastation of a war in which cities and lives had been destroyed. As Curran puts it, "The whole planet was in a state of shock." Evangelisti responded by embracing spontaneity and the practice of improvisation. He formed Gruppo Di Improvisazione Nuova Consonanza. A year or so later in 1966, Curran became a founding member of Musica Elettronica Viva.

Drawing on research by music historian Maxime Guitton, Baudelaire's film was commissioned for a forthcoming exhibition at Bristol's Spike Island. Although a section is subtitled "Of About Alvin Curran", the documentary avoids conventional portraiture and chronological storytelling. Today, controlling the narrative and monitoring optics have become priorities for those who desire to exercise power. In place of such goal-oriented narration, Paris based director

Licht

Oeke Hoogendijk (Director)

Witfilm 2022, 120 mins

Like her other films, director Oeke Hoogendijk's documentary *Licht* makes you feel like a stranger at a party where everybody knows everyone else. Although slightly uncomfortable, her style keeps you on your toes, which is necessary considering *Licht* is about Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928–2007). The seminal modernist was known to lure his critics into endless theoretical debates about his all-encompassing artistic universe. But Hoogendijk refuses to submit to what must have already been described as Stockhausen syndrome. Instead she moves straight to the uncomfortable personal questions, making *Licht* not so much a portrait of a troubled genius so much as his dysfunctional family.

Originally, Hoogendijk was invited to chronicle the making of *Aus Licht*, the

abridged, yet still 15 hour version of Stockhausen's 26 hour opera cycle *Licht*. *Aus Licht* became a three day marathon at Holland Festival in Amsterdam in 2019 which remains the most complete performance yet of an opera cycle only ever staged in parts. *Aus Licht* had been intended by stage director Pierre Audi to familiarise a younger audience with Stockhausen's heritage.

The original seven-opera cycle, one for each day of the week, does indeed summarise Stockhausen's oeuvre. It contains traces of his pioneering electronic music, as well as his unusual approach to classical instruments, most famously illustrated in the scene where a string quartet are divided between four helicopters hovering in the sky. There's also a mother figure being impregnated by a piano. And a pram race. And a war between trumpeters and trombonists.

In his struggle to streamline the opera



Stills from *When There Is No More Music To Write, And Other Roman Stories* (2022)

Baudelaire offers an illuminating montage, riddled with gaps and discontinuities. He embraces radical disruption: meaning is not packaged for consumption, but arises from a plurality of perspectives, through oblique connections and suggestive juxtapositions. Imagery is recycled rather than freshly shot. Curran is briefly glimpsed through vintage footage, but the focus soon shifts to an ant or an avalanche. Abundant sequences show scenes of social unrest, with violent clashes between police and protesters.

Baudelaire makes use of disjunctive techniques once flaunted by the modernist avant garde; Curran's soundtrack has been assembled in comparable fashion, collaging old field recordings and instrumental music. A child's joyful voice reverberates from his soundscape *Fiori Chiari, Fiori Oscuri* (1974). On screen, adults are beaten; others, in uniform, brandish weapons. The avant garde today,

Curran says, is an alliance resisting the status quo through its refusal to support corporate business and the power it wields. Art is made so other human beings may feel good, if only for a moment, in a world fraught with problems.

The haunting cry of a great northern diver is heard. It seems to transcend history. Curran suggests that the music of our time is the music of all time. In place of the apocalyptic scenario, forecast by Evangelisti, to be a living composer is now to be part of a large-scale experiment, where everything is possible. "I can put any sound with any other sound ... and I do it constantly," Curran reflects.

Composition has moved out of its element, and that is challenging. Yet music can transport us to places we have never experienced before, and that constitutes a vital process of resistance and affirmation.

Julian Cowley

cycle, Audi's documentary tones down its carnivalesque nature within a sleek, neon-lit stage design that inevitably leads to clashes with musical director Kathinka Pasveer and dramaturgical consultant Suzanne Stephens-Jenning, with whom Stockhausen had been living simultaneously for 25 years up to his death. They insist the players should perform the prescribed choreography. For his part Audi believes that "a musician can't act". He's confronted with bewildered performers when he attempts to make last minute adjustments to well-rehearsed scenes. "I never prepare anything," he bluntly declares.

For her part Hoogendijk sympathises with these performers as much as the victims of Stockhausen's bluntness. She interviews four of his six children, including the sons who became musicians in his universe but chose their own paths, and two daughters who refused to partake

in their father's musical masterplan. Ultimately, he left them all feeling rejected. He divorced their two mothers and replaced them with two female musical partners prepared to live in their communal home in Kürten near Cologne.

In the most poignant scenes, Hoogendijk reconstructs Stockhausen's life up to and including the Second World War. As a descendant of Holocaust victims, she empathises with his traumas. Stockhausen's father died on the Eastern Front, while his mother ended up in a mental institution where she was killed in the Nazi euthanasia programme. At 16, he was sent off to nurse gruesomely disfigured soldiers. Hoogendijk seemingly agrees with Audi that Stockhausen's back story is the essence of *Licht*, regardless of the hermetic theories about the formative power of light Stockhausen constructed around it.

Marinus de Ruiter