STOCKHAUSEN: Conversations with the Composer, edited by Jonathan Cott

ROBSON BOOKS, 1974 (£3.50 hardback)
PAN BOOKS, 1974 (£0.95 paperback)

These conversations between Stockhausen and Jonathan Cott took place in 1971. The first was published in ROLLING STONE magazine during that year, and that should give to someone who has ever read the magazine a good idea of the level at which the book aims. Let me hastily say that that comment is not intended to be merely derogatory: ROLLING STONE, at its best, is intelligent and penetrating, if sometimes a little overwritten; at its worst it descends to an eclectic mumbo-jumbo begging candidature for Pseud's Corner. The book shows both the virtues and vices of the magazine, though fortunately the lapses are comparatively few. What it is not, however, is a highly technical discussion of the music. To be sure, there are technical details, often extremely informative (Hymnen and Mantra receive extended treatment), but they are proffered by Stockhausen himself; Cott does not pursue these leads, preferring to talk about the ideas behind the music. Thus it is that the book should have a fairly broad appeal; no great technical knowledge is required of the reader, yet there is sufficient meat to keep the serious student of Stockhausen's music satisfied.

Cott's credentials (as presented to us by the biographical note) are not immediately convincing: is an anthologist of Victorian fairy-tale novels, stories, and poems, the author of a meditative gloss on Goethe's Elective Affinities one's first choice as an interviewer of the greatest living composer? Credentials notwithstanding, Cott delivers the goods. The conversations are endlessly revealing and make excellent reading. Cott's great virtue is that he is an innocent in the contentious world of contemporary music, posing beautifully simple and ingenous questions, though he is perhaps fortunate in that Stockhausen is a virtuoso talker who needs little stimulus to set him speaking at length. His chief failing lies in not following through a promising line of enquiry, being too eager to chime in with some recondite snippet of information in which he sees an analogy, often obscuring rather than clarifying, to something that Stockhausen has just said. The composer in his turn is rather too ready to agree with Cott's analogies, so that now and then one finds entertaining exchanges of apparent mutual agreement where one suspects that neither properly understood what the other was talking about. It would have been better had these been omitted. This is just one way in which Cott could have made a better job of the editing: certain topics recur naturally over the extended period of the conversations; there

seems to have been little attempt to gather these together. Since there is no index, this failure to collate information makes reference to the book extremely difficult.

Stockhausen has gained a reputation of being a severe and authoritarian figure, but what rises up out of these pages is a likable, rounded personality; Stockhausen the polymath: acoustician, architect, composer, conductor, conversationist, electronic engineer, father, husband, jazz pianist, lecturer, lover, mystic, orphan, pilgrim, philosopher, poet, polyglot, scientist, teacher, traveller, wit.

DAVID Ll ROBERTS