

# INVOCATIONS

Richard Kostelanetz

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COVER DRAWING BY RICHARD KOSTELANETZ

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# INVOCATIONS

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For his hour-long experiment in speech-music, Richard Kostelanetz recorded over sixty ministers reciting prayers in over two dozen languages. These prayers were then mixed on a twenty-four track machine into a series of duets, quintets and choruses that come together on the scale of J. S. Bach's St. Matthew Passion. "What Invocations attempts to discover," the author writes, "is those qualities that make all prayers sound like prayers, regardless of differences in language. Behind Invocations is the personal experience of living in Jerusalem; for in its Old City (where the holiest of holy places are preserved), one is likewise made aware of ultimate universalities among divisive differences." For all of its unusual structuring, Invocations is scarcely hermetic; indeed, its theme is as continuously evident as its sacredness.

In Invocations, as in other recent audio works, Kostelanetz is likewise attempting to realize on tape speech constructions that would be impossible in live performance. Here he puts into the same acoustic space prayers (and ministers) that would not normally (or otherwise) be heard together; and for that reason, as he writes, "My purposes are profoundly ecumenical." The author of many books of criticism, fiction and poetry, Kostelanetz has recently been working extensively in film, television and radio. To work on Invocations he received a grant from the Media Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts and a residency from the Electronic Music Studio of Stockholm.

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### RE INVOCATIONS

I am drawn to religious materials, here as in other audiotapes, in part for their familiarity, which allows me to transform spoken texts radically, not only amplifying speech in unusual ways, but also mixing several voices together, and nonetheless expect that the results will be widely and easily understood. For all of its unusual structuring, *Invocations* is scarcely hermetic. Indeed, a listener entering the work at any point can discern within a few minutes exactly what is happening and roughly what the work is about. Since my audio techniques treat these materials respectfully, I would like to think that I add to their spiritual quality, or at least give them a spiritual resonance that was not present before. In music and visual art, as well as literature, I am personally drawn to the possible beauty of religious expressions; and for keeping this last theme alive in my head, I am particularly indebted to my friend Norman Henry Pritchard, II, the great American poet to whom *Invocations* is dedicated.

The principal influences on *Invocations* are Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*--the *Passion* for its pace and overall structural concepts about movements among solos, duets, quintets and choruses; and *Finnegans Wake* for the theme of a single story that is told not in one language but many. What the experiment of *Invocations* attempts to discover is those qualities that make all prayers sound like prayers, regardless of differences in language. Behind *Invocations* is the personal experience of living in Jerusalem; for in its Old City (where the holiest of holy places are preserved), one is likewise made aware of ultimate universalities among divisive differences. Reflecting both literature and music, it could be called "sound poetry," "text-sound" or "speech music." To me, it is just a piece that acknowledges all those terms and their particular traditions.

Since there are at least two dozen languages in *Invocations*, it should be comprehensible to all, no matter one's native tongue, that the piece's subject is the sound, the beauty, the meaning and the purpose of the language of prayer. What is ultimately realized in the work, it seems to me, is that metalanguage that is prayer-language, just as *Finnegans Wake*



realizes the metalanguage of inter-familial relationships. Because the work brings together prayers that would not normally (or otherwise) be heard together--unlike Bach, I did not need to recruit my chorus into a single space--my purposes are profoundly ecumenical.

I had initially thought of doing Invocations in New York City, where church services are conducted in many languages; but in America we lack institutional machinery (and thus have little possibility) for producing such complex, elaborate Audio Art. Instead, Invocations would be done in Europe, first in West Berlin, where I spent the middle of 1981 as a guest of the DAAD Kunsterprogramm. The local public radio station, Sender Freies Berlin, gave me a car and an assistant who did all of the field recordings, mostly with me, sometimes on his own. We recorded ministers and only ministers, because I preferred speakers whose voices would reveal their experience at declaiming prayers. We solicited ministers' names and addresses from producers in charge of religious broadcasting at Berlin's two radio stations and even raided their archives, along with those of the state-supported Protestant recording studio. As we wanted the widest variety of denominations, we obtained a list of minority-language churches from a private Protestant church center. Some ministers introduced us to others. For three full weeks we took our recording machine all over town, to both free churches and state Evangelical (Lutheran) churches, to ethnic churches and esoteric sects, to the bases of Americans, British and French military forces. (With the Americans we recorded both the official chaplains and the unofficial.) We visited two Ceylonese Buddhist monks and their German colleague in a castle on top of a hill in the northern reaches of Berlin; we found a group of German-born Zazen worshippers preparing for a visit of their abbot. We heard a Greek, an Armenian, a Slovenian, a Croatian, a Copt, two Indonesians, two Koreans, two Russians, a Hungarian, a Swede, a Dane, and a Persian sufi, as well as a group of Baha'i who spoke in German, French, Polish and Persian. We recorded three rabbis (one born in Germany, the second in Greece, the third in America--the first two ordained, the third a layman), in addition to a Mennonite, a Huguenot, a German Mormon, a Methodist, a Swedenborgian, a Moravian Bretheren, a German woman in her late eighties who conducts a regular Zarathustran worship and a German minister who had done missionary work in Latin America (and could thus record for us in Spanish, in lieu of any native Spanish-speaking ministers). We found an Imam who wanted money for his prayers--we had no budget for that--and a Syrian Orthodox minister who could speak neither English nor German, in spite of his Germanic name, and thus communicated to us through his teenage granddaughter. We taped two Catholic priests, one an American and the other British, speaking both English and Latin, and a third priest, a Berlin Jesuit, in English, Latin and German. All these ministers were recorded not in a dead-quiet radio studio but in their churches and offices with all their various, sometimes abundant background sounds. No element was more difficult than recording a Turkish Moslem service, not only because secular Turks wanted us to avoid their religious compatriots but because of an operational misfortune. My assistant arrived in time to record the call to service; but once the parishioners came, they physically excavated him to make room for themselves. His attempt to record from outside the mosque was foiled by an American helicopter, doing its military duties



no doubt; so that the only Turkish heard in Invocations is, three times, this haunting call to prayer.

Once the ministers were recorded, these tapes were shipped to Stockholm, where I assumed a residency at the state-supported Electronic Music Studio. I carefully audited the Berlin recordings, deciding which sections to use (and which not), and then brought them into the twenty-four track studio for transferring the tracks. We began by composing sections--first the strings of Lord's Prayers that became the introductions to the piece, then the succession of solos, then the duets and quintets and finally the denser choruses. The thickest chorus in the piece exploited all twenty-four tracks of the Stockholm studio's machine. Once the sections were complete, I decided in what order they should go, usually remembering the St. Matthew Passion and customarily putting in the first half an element that had a parallel in the second half. After ten days of working around the clock, Invocations was done. The completed stereo tapes I brought back to Berlin were accepted by Sender Freies Berlin for broadcast on Busstag, which is the Protestant day of atonement in mid-November--an official holiday in Germany, when only music is customarily heard over the radio.

Invocations would not have been realized without the generous support of many individuals and institutions: Dr. Wieland Schmied and Barbara Richter of the DAAD Berliner Kunstlerprogramm; Brian O'Doherty and Don Druker of the Media Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts; Ulrich Gerhardt and Ludwig Schultz of Sender Freies Berlin; Lars-Gunnar Bodin, Bill Brunson and Ragnar Grippe of the Electronic Music Studio of Stockholm; and, of course, the ministers of Berlin. All of them deserve my gratitude.

The version on the record here begins in English; that first broadcast in Germany begins with a sequence of three ministers reciting the Lord's Prayer in German but is otherwise identical. Other versions, similarly identical beyond their beginnings, open with a similar series in Latin, spoken respectively with a British accent, an Italian-American accent and a German accent; in Scandinavian languages, with a Swede followed by a Dane (followed by an Englishman); in Adriatic languages, with the Lord's Prayer in Serbian, Italian, Croatian and Greek; and finally a sequence of three Hebrew prayers followed by the Lord's Prayer in Syriac (which incidentally sounds very much like Hebrew). These other Invocations, originally intended for radio broadcast in each of these language areas, are also available on privately published stereo audiocassettes (with Dolby) at \$12.00 each and at \$50.00 for the set of five, postpaid, from RK Editions, P.O. Box 73, Canal Street, New York, NY 10013. Invocations was copyright in 1981 and 1983 by Richard Kostelanetz. All rights reserved, including duplication and broadcast. Those interested in airing the work, either over radio or in concert, should contact the author % RK Editions.

RICHARD KOSTELANETZ (b. 1940, New York, NY) has written many books of poetry, fiction, criticism and cultural history, in addition to producing audiotapes, videotapes and film. His radio programs have been aired in Germany, Canada, Australia and several places in the U.S. An exhibition of his creative work in several media, Wordsand, has been traveling since 1978.



Invocations is his first solo record. He recently completed a fugue of The Gospels/Die Evangelien for Westdeutschen Rundfunk and is presently fulfilling two commissions, "Kaddish" and "New York City."

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**INVOCATIONS**

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by **RICHARD KOSTELANETZ**

SIDE 1

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**INVOCATIONS**  
(continued)

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