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Ian Pace

Music of the Absurd? Thoughts on recent Kagel

Tempo, New Ser., No. 200 (April 1997), pp. 29-34.

In recent years, Europe has seen numerous retrospectives of the music of Mauricio Kagel. The last such in Britain was the 1995 Huddersfield Festival; since then a handful of his works have been performed in London. In tandem, Disques Montaigne have been steadily issuing their Kagel edition, which currently stands at eight volumes: the first four were reviewed by Antony Bye (and the first also by Nicolas Hodges) in *Tempo 188*¹. In a similar manner to recent retrospectives of Stockhausen and Nono, the focus has been upon the work of the last 10-20 years, perhaps not least because of the many country premieres then available, but maybe because of a fashionable tendency to treat music of the 1960s and early 1970s as rather *passé*.

The London Sinfonietta presented a day of Kagel² three of his films — the satirical *Antithese* (1965), his 'take' on film music and the cinematic piano, *MM51 Nosferatu* (1983), in which Aloys Kontarsky's performance on both piano and metronome accompanies a showing of part of F.W. Murnau's film, and *Szenario (un chien andalou)* (1982), an accompaniment to Buñuel combining a string orchestra with the sounds of barking dogs — preceded a concert of three of his works. The most impressive piece was ..., *den 24.xii.1931* (1988-91), 'garbled news' for baritone, four strings, piano duet and 2 percussionists. When approaching his 60th birthday, Kagel became curious to know of events of the day of his birth. He plundered several newspapers from that date and set to music some of the more noteworthy news items he encountered.

In a witty introduction, the baritone ponders the exact date in question (can one understand the events of a particular day without also considering the days that surround it? If so, where does one stop?), then the second movement describes a prison rebellion in Buenos Aires. After a heavy stomp with what may be a purposefully undirectional melody, Kagel gives representation to interpolated details of the events, so that the percussionists tap imitation morse code signals with knuckles on the floor, an iron file and a chain. Other 'naturalistic' effects include a sack of glass, sirens, fog horns, whistles and the pianist striking the lid, which Kagel describes in the score as 'muffled marching of troops'. Hushed rising strings accompany the baritone's information that some of the convicts succeeded in clambering onto the prison roof. After telling of the arrival of troop and police reinforcements, the baritone begins the narrative again, only to stop at the end of the first phrase and pause for reflection, to which the ensemble responds blankly with repeated notes and descending chromatic figurations (which are a recurring motive in much of Kagel's work). The baritone delivers the news that the prisoners were overwhelmed in soft tones, 'monotonously', indicating that the crushing of a rebellion is, alas, an inevitable affair.

Other movements include the announcement by the commander-in-chief of a Japanese army unit that he does not intend to occupy a Manchurian city, but however will purge the region for bandits. This is half-sung in strained tones, whilst the ensemble plays with elements of pastiche—oriental music, at first alternating the third between 'major' and 'minor' within an pentatonic scale, whilst the percussion use a variety of both Chinese and Japanese instruments. After the near-hysteria presented

¹ See *Tempo 188* (March 1994), pp. 42-44.

² 'Mauricio Kagel at 65 - Music of the Absurd': QEH, Sunday 1 December 1996: London Sinfonietta, c. Reinbert de Leeuw. Roland Herrmann (bar).

here, the following movement, a setting of an appalling cigar advertisement ('The National Socialist smokes only "Parole"!'), is a jaunty march, though on the verge of audibility, the performers supplementing their playing with tapping or whistling together with the baritone, who eventually presents the words in a very quiet *Sprechgesang*, 'bawling, martial, but in a drunken voice, and always mezza voce ("from far off")'. The aura thus created would seem to be Kagel's method of demonstrating the sheer horror, with hindsight, of what at the time seemed quite natural.

After moments of tenderness (to accompany the description of a roof collapsing in the Vatican library), and rather more contrived music for a letter from a German immigrant to Argentina who finds himself unemployed at Christmas, Kagel's last movement concerns the simultaneous ringing of many church bells in North America on Christmas Day, initiated by an electric current. As well as the clanging material in the ensemble, a tape of pealing bells almost drowns out the baritone, who is himself imitating bells. The effect is delirious, and the sea sound (my metaphor) seems to be interpreted literally, as foghorns wail over the top.

This work is immensely memorable, and succeeds in a neo-Brechtian subversion of received (and recognizable) musico-generic devices towards ends quite distinct from their original motivation. It is not without its problems, however. The theatrical effects (percussionist placing hands in boots to tap on wood, emptying a sack of books, flicking through a telephone directory, igniting sparks) are a little gimmicky, and would become tiresome upon repeated viewing. Kagel's irony does not extend to questioning the very expressive devices which he uses (in this and many other works) to generate meaning. As a result the piece can be rather forceful, leaving little room for a listener make up their own mind.

Prior to this piece, we heard *Westen* (1993-94) from the now complete cycle of eight pieces for salon orchestra *Die Stücke der Windrose* (1988-94), five of which are featured on one of the Montaigne CDs.³ Each of the pieces makes use of musics from a particular location on the compass point in question. *Osten* (1988-39), located 'somewhere between Trans—Carpathia and the Gulf of Finland' is entertaining (with nods in the direction of Stravinsky, including *Le sacre*), but is it really much of an advance on Prokofieff or Shostakovich? The muted nature of Shostakovich's irony was understandable given his circumstances, but why does Kagel feel it necessary to act similarly? *Westen* has as its principal conceit that the African slaves colonized the Americas with their musical culture. The sounds of banjo, harmonica, harmonium and washboard are amongst those which come into conflict, culminating in the chopping of a tree-trunk by a crazed percussionist. A woman sitting behind me seemed to find this hilarious, to judge from her periodic titters. But didn't Maxwell Davies write this kind of thing in the 1960s? Like most of the cycle, it is highly sectional with little sense of overall meaningfulness. Taken as a whole, *Die Stücke der Windrose*, for all the range of its musical reference, betrays a lack of differentiation below the surface, as the musical procedures are lacking either in strength or presence.

The other work in the programme was the *Orchestrion-Straat* (1995-96), inspired by a volume *13 eerie tales* by Hans Henny Jahnn, in which is described a boy's encounter with the orchestrion music making of a fair in Oslo. The players are seated in pairs diagonally along the stage, to suggest a street itself. It is dedicated to 'the musicians out there on the street' and represents a very laudable attempt to

³ *5 Stücke der Windrose; Osten, Süden, Nordesten, Nordwesten, Südosten, Phantasiestücke*. Schönberg Ensemble c. Reinbert de Leeuw. Disques montaigne MO 782017.

‘imagine merry-go-rounds and automatic organs as being increasingly serious vehicles for serious music in the open air’. However this stylistic funfair again becomes samey, for similar reasons as those described above. At the end of the work, the percussionists run off the stage and jangle collecting tins at the audience (a wry comment on the financial problems besetting contemporary music making?) I can only imagine being irritated by this a second time around.

The particular choice of programme, each piece essentially part of the same aspect of Kagel's work, led to overload and a sense of repetition. The performances, which played up the kitsch elements, actually blunted the irony through overstatement, and thus were a little bland, over-blurring the more serious messages beneath the surface. ‘A much finer performance of ...*den 24.xii.1931* is available on MO 872009, coupled with *Finale* (1980-81). After the end of the concert, I was yearning for something raw and emotional where emotion is not at ‘one remove’ (a tape of Xenakis's *Thallein* I found in the car soon rectified this situation!).

The longest work in the Montaigne collection is the *Sankt-Bach Passion* (1981-85), Kagel's retelling of the life of Bach using some of the conventions of Bach's own Passions⁴. This is scored for mezzo-soprano, tenor, baritone, speaker (often playing the role of Bach, whose part is entirely spoken), 2 choirs and a children's choir, with a medium-size orchestra (triple wind) including piano duet, organ, celeste, 2 harps and harpsichord. The text is assembled from a myriad of sources, including many historical documents: letters, newspaper articles, Bach's obituary, etc., and also some words from Bach's own works. Often these are distorted: e.g. Bach's obituary is altered to the first person and spoken by himself, whereas, in a truly irreverent manner, the word ‘Bach’ is substituted for ‘God’ in some chorales.

The narrative works its way through the events of Bach's life in a roughly chronological manner. The music is described by Kagel as performing a ‘slight phase shift between narrative, description and musical illustration’. He shares Bach's interest in numerology, though he claims this is more as a result of his experiences of serial technique than for mystical reasons. A note-row derived from a numerical interpolation of the name ‘Johann Sebastian Bach’ serves as a fundamental compositional determinant for the whole piece. Similar procedures are used for the generation of durations, dyrunaics and large—scale formal proportions. Bach's own voice is not heard until the 16th section, which relates to Kagel's considerations of the *St. Matthew Passion*.

Very little of Bach's own music is actually quoted in the piece, but it is clear from the outset that the work alludes to Bach in differing ways. A descending chromatic scale, in homage to the A minor prelude from Book 2 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, is a recurring motif throughout, and the particular type of chromaticism encountered in this piece is extensively developed. These aspects are tempered by the frequent use of quintessentially un-Bachian parallel chords. In the 20th section, in which Bach's marriages and children are detailed, a solo violin plays arpeggiated figures in the manner of one of the solo suites, later reprised in a more chromatic form. Overall, the work seems to contain not only the seeds of Bach's music, but also echoes of his many re-interpreters; Liszt, Busoni, Berg, B.A. Zimmermann.

⁴ Sankt-Bach-Passion. Anne Sofie von Otter (mezzo), Hans-Peter Blochwitz (ten), Roland Hermann (bar). Peter Roggisch (speaker), Gerd Zacher (organ), Limburger Domsingknaben; NDR-Chor Hamburg; Siidfunk-Chor Stuttgart, RadioSinfonie-Orchester Stuttgart, c. Mauricio Kagel. Disques Montaigne MO 782044 (2 CDs).

Other stylistic allusions and musical illustrations occur, to the sounds of a troubadour-like band when Bach is described as having heard a famous ensemble of Frenchmen, 'and thus acquired a lasting taste for the French style'. When Bach's voice is described in its breaking stages, he found that 'along with the soprano notes he had to sing, the lower octave sounded as well', to which the children's and main choir respond appropriately.

Bach does indeed become a Christ-like figure: at different points venerated, misunderstood and persecuted. His words are usually soft-spoken but confident, producing a messianic quality. The 16th section, which resembles a courtroom drama, relates to an incident after Bach had visited Lübeck to hear Buxtehude play (invoked by a 'super-organ' using strings as well as the organ in dense textures), and as such had been absent from his duties as organist of the New Church. The baritone plays the role of a superintendent, whose admonishments then extend to Bach's 'having made many astonishing *variations* to the Chorale... and mixing in many foreign notes, such as caused great *confusion* in the congregation', to which the chorus, like a mesmerized teenage fan club squealing with delight, sing 'oooooooo! confusion confusion ...oooooooo! many foreign foreign foreign'. In the following section they become more like a devoted multitude of followers.

Chorales appear throughout, in whose sacred words resonances and metaphors are found for the biographical events. The vocal writing becomes progressively more distorted (though from the very beginning elements of unusual vocal techniques are used). By the 23rd section, the whole choir incant *Sprechgesang* with *glissandi* at high volumes, producing a horrifying effect. In the 30th section, the ominous unpitched semi-chanting of the children's choir ('Come, o Death, brother to sleep') is most unnerving. This and other large-scale determinants, together with the intricacy of text, music and their interrelationships on a more detailed level, combine to produce a magisterial work that continues to stimulate in new ways upon repeated listening.

Other works of Kagel are more direct in their use of musical reference and quotation. In *Finale*, after the conductor has collapsed onto the ground (an expression of Kagel's apprehension of his own mortality upon reaching the age of 50), the piano plays an uncertain, one-fingered version of the *Dies Irae*, to be followed by the trumpet solo from Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The carillon in *Nah and Fem* similarly plays a passage from 'Jupiter' from Holst's *The Planets*. These sorts of references can seem 'clever' in a rather trite manner; listeners can indulge in self-congratulation whenever they recognize one of the quotations, reducing the listening experience to little more than an elevated point—scoring exercise.

Kagel would seem to be treating music like a language, whereby meaning can be generated by combining or distorting pre-existing words or styles. If one accepts a neo-structuralist model of music (i.e. that its expressive potential is an essentially arbitrary cultural construct, and as such can have no meaning to one unversed in musical history and the associated socio-cultural conventions) then this approach is surely the only valid one. But I find the fundamentalism of this often-held position absurd — does anyone really believe that the ear's different responses to an octave or two pitches a quarter-tone apart are purely the result of conditioning? Music, by virtue of its nature (without which the type of irony which Kagel sometimes exploits would be a blunt weapon indeed), is capable of a level of immediacy towards which language can only serve as a pointer, demonstrated if by nothing else by the fact that language does not cross national barriers. Some might cite the onomatopoeic features

of language as a converse to this argument, but is that not precisely to celebrate those occasions when language aspires to the condition of music?

The many thorny areas these arguments open up (eg. the respective virtues of art's operating on an unconscious, and thus more immediate and accessible, or conscious, and thus less potentially manipulating, level) are amongst the most debated aesthetic issues this century and are really beyond the scope of this review. Nonetheless, if music is to be intelligible to any but a very small elite (and often that which is exclusive appeals precisely because it alerts the select few to their very exclusivity), then a work must surely include some level which is perceptible to an untutored ear upon first hearing. If listeners are not stimulated in some way after the first encounter, then why should they explore further?

Orchestrion-Straat and *Die Stücke der Windrose* suffer either because the degree of abstruseness of their stylistic referentiality obscures the procedures, or perhaps because the procedures themselves are not really that substantial. I would hope that the former is the case, which then leads to questions more usually associated with Fernyhough (the comparison is not fortuitous; Paul Griffiths's description of Fernyhough as a 'post-modern modernist'⁵ might equally well be applied to the earlier Kagel). Yet for all the notational and conceptual detail in Fernyhough's work there is generally, I think, a level on which the music is immediate in both emotional and intellectual senses. By contrast, *Orchestrion-Straat*'s immediacy is only on the level of a colouristic kaleidoscope. which soon becomes banal and puts one off from re-approaching the work.

The works involving texts or theatre enable Kagel's ideas to be communicated more readily, as the music, the more 'abstract' medium, is then able to enter into a dialogue. A most interesting work is *Nah and Fern* (1993-94). one of Kagel's *Hörspiele* for radio, which combines music from three earlier works, the *Melodien für Carillon* (1993), *Morceau de concours* (1972) and *Fanfanfaren* (1993), the latter two for trumpets, as well as many other sounds.⁶ The structure is almost that of an imaginary narrative using only sounds, no words, an aural equivalent of a silent movie (Kagel mentions in the printed conversation with Klaus Schöning that cinematic ideas informed the work).

Kagel can be at his best when exploiting the characteristics of that to which he refers, rather than in iconic features. *Unguis incarnatus est* (1972; the title means 'ingrowing toenails') for bass instrument (a cello on the CD) and piano, is based on Liszt's *Nuages gris*. Kagel breaks Liszt's work down into melodic fragments, harmonies, particular figurations (in particular. tremolos) and pedallings, then constructs a new work out of these fragments or variations thereof. The broad structure mirrors the Liszt, but the elements all threaten to pull the piece in different directions. The pedalling acquires a life of its own, as the pianist pedals rhythms and later repeated pulses without playing any notes, culminating in a 60- second pedal crescendo, after which the pianist shouts 'Liszt' and the other player 'Tzsil', like the German *Ziel* - end or goal.

The disc featuring this work⁷ is probably the most interesting of all the Montaigne series (though I wouldn't want to be without the 1st and End volumes, featuring the String Quartets (MO 739004). *Zwei Akte*, *Rrrr...* and *Blue's Blue* (MO

⁵ See *Modern Music and After* by Paul Griffiths (Oxford, 1995), pp. 263-4.

⁶ *Nah and Fern*. Arie Abbenes (bells of Domkerk Utrecht). Markus Stockhausen, Marco Blaauw, Andreas Adam, Achitri Gorsch (tptsj, c. Mauricio Kagel. Disques Montaigne MO 732062.

⁷ *Klangwölfe; Unguis incarnatus est: An Tasten; Trio*. Sachko Gawriloff (vln). Siegfried Palm (vcl), Bruno Canino (pno). Disques Montaigne NO 782043.

782003)). ‘Also included is the wonderful Piano Trio (1984-85), based on material from the stage work *Le Trahison Orale*, but entirely appropriate to this combination, which also focusses on musical elements removed from their natural context and parodistically‘ extended beyond expectations. A melody on violin and piano hardly progresses beyond a tonic chord, whilst the cello mockingly plays a repeated E minor triad and an 'oompah' in a different tempo. A rumba accompaniment, in which the bass line veers perilously between three and four beats, is extended without any melodic appearance. A slightly Beethovenian passage in dotted rhythms in the strings is marred by their having to play much *sul ponticello*. The piece is one of Kagel’s wittiest in its moments of false pathos, but is also very beautiful, creating something truly new out of the fragments of the old. Similarly, the piano study *An Tasten* (1979) begins by parodying a pianist's technical exercise, but develops in many directions so as to produce a fascinating and beguiling piece.

Variété (1976-77) acts in a similar manner upon elements derived from circus music. The full length staged version, presented as part of Almeida Opera, is indeed a variety show, which in this case involved the amazing performers from Circus Space, including balancing acts, rope-climbing and miraculous separating of interlinked hoops. The music, inhabiting the worlds of the march, rumba and sleazy cabaret, to name but a few, is full of dark ruminations and has an overall progress from vivaciousness towards melancholy. A suggestion, perhaps, of the seedier side of the circus world? On Disques Montaigne M0 782013, Kagel conducts Ensemble Modern in a shorter concert suite from this work, which succeeds in the intention, described by Richard Toop in his programme note, to invite the listener to imagine ‘which of Kagel's *parade sauvage* holds centre stage during each of the eleven musical numbers’.

An oft-cited charge against Kagel in the earlier days was that the conceptual underpinning of his works (usually of a more didactic nature than of recent years) was of greater substance than the works themselves. Yet in those works the ideas were merely the foundations upon which Kagel synthetically constructed his monumental edifices. Some of the more recent music would seem to be much more amenable to a rather too neat verbal explanation, notwithstanding the greater length such a written exposition takes. The music can then become too transparent, suggesting that music itself as a medium is hardly being exploited to its full potential.

Kagel has been described as ‘music's social critic’⁸. This is self-evident in the earlier works, to the extent that he has been denounced from the pulpit.⁹ Yet I wonder if more recently the element of critique has been conveniently muted, enabling his work to be unthreatening to all but the most acutely aware, moving from sardonic parody to affectionate pastiche, thus ensuring success. Or perhaps Kagel, having now lived in Europe for 40 years, has finally been seduced by that which he originally stood outside of? At the London Sinfonierta concert, it certainly could not have been said, as David Sawer's introduction claimed, that Kagel's ‘treatment of the apparently hallowed values of European art music continues to irritate, disturb and enrage his audience, right up today’.

The issues his work faces are for the most part contained within the cultural sphere, as opposed to the broader social and political arena. The work of Dieter Schnebel, on the other hand, demonstrates that cultural issues act as a window onto the wider world. Thus Schnebel's *Nostalgie* (filmed by Kagel as *Solo*) uses the

⁸ 'Kagel: Music's Social Critic' by Richard Toop in *Music and Musicians* Vol. 22, No. 9, May 1974.

⁹ This is described in *New Perspectives in Music* by Roger Sutherland (London: Sun Tavern Fields, 1994), p.202.

medium of a conductor without music (or with a tape of only barely audible fragments from the most standard repertoire, 'whose social function can be most clearly comprehended) to suggest the futility of nostalgia for that which has passed, whereas the infighting between players in Schnebel's *anschlage-ausschlage* minors *all* human relationships. His *Beethoven-Symphonie*, a heavily sarcastic rendition of the first movement of Beethoven's 5th, confronts an audience with an uncomfortable perspective on what this work has come to be. Chris Newman, a one-time student of Kagel, similarly works with 'found' musical materials, but manages in a different manner to find with perverse beauty or sinister undertones in the seemingly banal, in a less manipulative manner than some of Kagel's work.

But as ever with Kagel, I have my doubts. Maybe he has the last laugh, mocking the po-faced seriousness of myself and others who try to get to the bottom of his work. He could, after all, have a concealed agenda: to show up the pretensions of those who analyse and probe music, or expose the emptiness and backward-looking nature of the 'post-modern' aesthetic. If Kagel is to be described by this loathsome term, then perhaps this is the crunch question: is his music a response to a late-capitalist world in which everything has a label and a price but value is a meaningless term, or is it itself a product of this world? If the former holds true, then Kagel might be a more subversive composer than has ever previously been assumed to be the case.

The question of whether 'post-modernism' is a progressive or reactionary ideology hinges on the degree of synthesis. The creation of something not-yet-heard from original distortions, modifications, juxtapositions or contextualization of scraps of the pre-existing, could be seen as a workmanlike antidote to the bourgeois notion of the artist as a solitary, possibly solipsistic individual, removed from the concerns of the population at large, and praised when they have found 'their own voice'. On the other hand, convenient use of expressive cliches can be a cheap way of appealing to an audience's nostalgia and fear of the new. However, even art produced according to the former motivation can gain an audience for the wrongest reasons if the critique is not sufficiently pronounced. Kagel does not often fall into this trap, but his current approach may be dangerous in this respect.

After all the many retrospectives focussing on Kagel's music from the last 15 to 20 years, what we need now is revivals of those seminal masterpieces from the 50s, 60s and early 70s. The greatest service that both performers and Disques Montaigne, in their ongoing series, could perform, would be to present *Sexteto de Cuerdas*, *Anagrama*, *Sur Scene*, *Match*, *Musik fur Renaissance-Instrumente*, *Phantasie*, *Hallelujah*, *Unter Strom*, *Exotica*, or if really ambitious, *Staatstheater*. Concerts which include both early and late works would enable both to be better understood and contextualized.