MAURICIO KAGEL FESTIVAL

Paul Christopher, cello • Trevor Davis, bass clarinet
Gregory Lyons • Mel Mobley • Oliver Molina, percussion

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

When the Argentine composer **Mauricio Kagel (1931-2008)** arrived in West Germany in 1957, the European avant-garde was in its heyday. It was the presence of Karlheinz Stockhausen, quickly becoming the leader among German avant-gardists, which had drawn Kagel to Cologne, as it had drawn György Ligeti and Cornelius Cardew that same year. Indeed, Stockhausen had just completed his celebrated electronic piece, *Gesang der Jünglinge*, which would eventually win him a spot on the cover of The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* album, and, throughout 1957, he was busily finishing his next groundbreaking work, *Gruppen* for three orchestras. Kagel immediately plunged himself into this circle of innovators by writing articles for Stockhausen's journal *Die Reihe* and contributing to the new music broadcasts of WDR radio. Most significantly though, from 1958, he would attend the Darmstadt summer courses where the international avant-garde annually convened and, within a few years, began lecturing there himself. Ultimately, throughout his life, his compositions would be featured regularly at Darmstadt as well as at the equally important Donaueschingen Festival and other new music venues worldwide. Yet, as far as aesthetics were concerned, Kagel refused to blindly accept integral serialism, the system which Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, and their comrades had labored to establish in the early 1950s. Of course, they too had embraced the philosophy of American experimentalist John Cage—had even invited him to lecture at their Darmstadt stronghold—but they also remained hesitant to borrow too much from Cage. In other words, Stockhausen and Boulez never became "experimental" composers: they did not challenge the very definition of music, only what sounds constituted music and how to structure these sounds. For them, music always remained tied to sound.

Kagel, however, might be considered a true experimentalist, regardless of his acceptance into the circle of the European avant-garde. For Kagel, music was action, and the entire activities of composition and performance were the music, not merely the sounds created through these activities. Performers, for example, might comment verbally or visually on the difficulty of playing particular lines; moreover, anything which happens, either on-stage or off, within the time allotted for the piece, is considered part of the piece. Performance essentially becomes a kind of theatre where sounds can occur, but also might not. Kagel's opera *Staatstheater*, which premiered in 1971, is a summation of this music theatre. Although *Staatstheater* includes all the traditional performers of opera (i.e. soloists, a chorus, dancers, and instrumentalists), it denies them any of the conventions to which they are accustomed. Soloists are forced to sing in ensembles; chorus members must sing solos; a ballet is performed by non-dancers; and there is no pit in which to segregate instrumentalists. The opera also lacks a libretto, a proper score, and stage décor, so that what actually happens on stage *is* what happens and not a representation of something else. In effect, the suspension of disbelief that has always been the very essence of theatre is no longer necessary nor even possible. It would be as if we accepted Wagner's valkyries to be the average women, masquerading in horned helmets and armor, we know them to be and ignored the fiction we see—and which, in fact, they want us to see—unfolding on stage. Or, more accurately, if this fiction were to vanish altogether. (As a side note, Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* and Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, both operas composed in the mid-1970s, adapt some aspects of Kagel's *Staatstheater*.)

Staatstheater also demonstrates another important aspect of Kagel's music: how he engages with music history, or, we might say, how the activity of composition becomes part of the music. In *Staatstheater*, Kagel sets out to create an opera which at once can really be called an opera, but which also denies nearly all the conventions accumulated by opera. Something similar happens in Kagel's *Exotica* when musicians trained in the Western tradition are instructed to take up unfamiliar, non-

Western instruments and create sounds with them. Or, when in *Variationen ohne Fuge*, the corpse of Brahms appears and interrogates the musicians as they play an unknown version of his music. Kagel, unlike so many avant-gardists who were dismissive of the musical past, acknowledges the past, but also calls it into question. The music then becomes referential as the activity of composition extends beyond the musical sounds notated on paper to the overall situation which Kagel outlines. To this end, Kagel commented in a 2004 interview with Paul Steenhuisen, "The past is a very important dimension of the present, but it's not *the* present. You can't neglect the past. We are composers today because there is a lot of music written before us, and we have to be aware of this." Simultaneously, as Kagel deconstructs the musical world around him, he constructs his own bizarre reality where contradictions are perfectly acceptable, even the norm. This is possible because Kagel does not spew dogma, like so many avant-gardists, but approaches each composition with his peculiar sense of humor, less interested in expounding a system than in seeing where a profound experiment might lead.

Tonight we encounter four compositions by Mauricio Kagel. The first, *Con voce*, dates from 1972 and is a work for three mute players. As the score instructs, three instrumentalists, two standing and one sitting or *vice versa*, are to appear on-stage in a tight group. They are not to play until the audience appears restless at which point they should begin miming the playing of their instruments, but still not truly play as expected. The musicians are directed to either silently pretend to play; sing, hum, or whistle the expected instrumental sounds; or create with their instruments noises which are traditionally considered non-musical. Anyway, Kagel provides a specific list of options as to how they cannot create "music," even notates a melody, and demands calm and concentration from them despite the audience's response. Unusually for Kagel, he also explains the context of *Con voce* in his dedication. He states the piece was written following the Soviet invasion of Prague and that the musicians are here robbed of their instrumental voices, much like the suppressed Czech population. Thus, it is an entirely serious affair, despite the apparent comedy of the effect. The title, which means "with voice," is purposefully ironic—the instruments have lost their voices; the musicians who wield these instruments have also lost the manner in which they conventionally communicate. This brief example of Kagel's instrumental theatre demonstrates how he has composed a situation and not merely a precise ordering of notes. It also follows in the lineage of Cage's "silent piece," *4'33"*, neither of which are necessarily silent as they expand the definition of music beyond sound.

Siegfriedp' for solo cello was composed in 1971 for the preeminent cellist Siegfried Palm. A fierce advocate of new music, Palm commissioned and performed new works from many of the era's leading composers, including Ligeti, Xenakis, Penderecki, Feldman, Isang Yun, and Bernd Alois Zimmermann. He and Kagel were also friends, and, in the 1960s and 1970s, Palm was based in Cologne as principal cellist of the WDR Symphony Orchestra and then as director of that city's music conservatory. *Siegfriedp'* is built around a series of five pitch classes which appear in Siegfried Palm's name: E-G-F-D-A. This melodic fragment is spun-out in what Kagel calls a "perpetual variation" with notes frequently jumping into different registers. Many pitches appear in the upper register and must be played through the use of artificial harmonics. Bow placement (i.e. near the bridge or over the fingerboard) fluctuates incessantly as do dynamics. Rhythms also expand and contract, so that, between all of these factors, successive variations become increasingly more difficult. Theatre is also not lacking from this piece, and there is a special staff provided for the cellist to shout his frustrations regarding the increasing difficulties. Actually, the first sound we hear is not from the cello but from the already frustrated cellist, catching a first glance at what he must soon play. Kagel had studied cello as a child and knew well the challenges posed in this piece. It is these challenges, therefore, that find expression as the theatre of *Siegfriedp'*.

Next we hear *Dressur*, a percussion trio completed in 1977 as part of Kagel's instrumental theatre cycle, *Quatre degrés*. Björn Heile, in his biography of Kagel, writes that this cycle is more concerned with popular culture than many of Kagel's other works, noting that "he seems enthralled by the vitality of popular culture, but satirizes its often hackneyed sentiments, commodified clichés, and cheap sleaziness." The title of *Dressur*, indeed, means dressage, the style of strict horse training. In *Dressur*, the three percussionists play on wooden instruments ranging from the conventional—a marimba, claves, castanets, and rattles—to the absurd. The preface to the score makes for entertaining reading as Kagel insistently lists-off that each of these found instruments are made of wood: a (wooden) chair, (wooden) tables, multiple wooden balls, bamboo rattle (wooden wind chimes), elephant bell (block of wood), wooden whistle, nutcracker made of wood, and two pairs of wooden shoes all figure on his list. Throughout, Kagel notates theatrical actions as closely as he does staved notes, creating a whole scenario in which

each percussionist becomes a character. This scenario begins with the second percussionist who plays on the marimba a circus gallop, *Erinnerung an Zirkus Renz*, by Gustav Peter. The first percussionist seems irritated and, after only a few measures, begins picking up his chair and smashing it on the ground as if to interrupt. Later, Kagel's instructions read, "lift chair above player two's head with strong impulse—as if to attack." The antics continue without the circus gallop, or its progenitor, ever meeting their demise and reach a climax with a mock fandango dance in the wooden shoes and shouts of "*olé*."

The final work we hear tonight was also the latest to have been composed. *Schattenklänge*, three pieces for bass clarinet, was written in 1995 and dedicated to the composer Luciano Berio, another fixture of the European avant-garde at mid-century and, like Ligeti and Palm, a close friend to Kagel. In his preface to the score, Kagel offers two options for performing this composition: either plainly, without theatre, as a concert piece, or with the performer standing, behind a white screen. In this second, more elaborate setup, spotlights are to illuminate the player, so that his movements are cast on the screen. This scenario helps explain the title of the composition, which means "shadow sounds," but so does the nocturnal timbre of the bass clarinet itself. Kagel also instructs that the intensity of the spotlights should change, but gradually and without reference to the faster actions of the music. Each of the three pieces addresses different kinds of sounds. The first contrasts sustained notes colored by trills, flutter tongue, or breathy playing with rapid chains of notes. The second focuses on fast, very breathy arpeggios where the resulting mechanical noises of the instrument, typically avoided, are given emphasis; the close of the second piece, in fact, obscures pitched sound altogether as percussive key clicks and air noises take over. The third piece shifts its attention to melodic fragments which contain large leaps and, consequently, seem to run haphazardly from one fragment to another. Evidently, the purely musical exchanges of *Schattenklänge* create their own kind of theatre, much like in *Siegfriedp'*; its optional staging, however, grants this composition the more pervasive theatricality of *Con voce* or *Dressur*.

About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer is a freelance concert annotator based in Louisville, KY. He serves as Director of Scholarship to the Sugarmill Music Festival held each May in Alexandria, LA. A project he is developing for the 2020 festival, "A Scholarly Presentation in Lecture and Music: Solomon Northup in the Central Louisiana Sugarhouse," has been awarded a prestigious Rebirth Grant by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. Jackson earned an M.M. in Music History and Literature from the University of Louisville with a thesis entitled, "Liminal Aesthetics: Perspectives on Harmony and Timbre in the Music of Olivier Messiaen, Tristan Murail, and Kaija Saariaho." There he was the recipient of the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship and was employed at the Dwight Anderson Memorial Music Library where he did archival work for the unique Grawemeyer Collection which houses scores, recordings, and documentation for over five thousand entries by the world's leading contemporary composers. He has shared his research at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter's annual meetings in Asheville, NC and Sewanee, TN; the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival in Knoxville, TN; the Music by Women Festival in Columbus, MS; and the University of Louisiana System Academic Summit in Thibodeaux, LA. Aside from his studies, Jackson is a composer, choral singer, music blogger, avid reader, and award-winning nature photographer.

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