MAURICIO KAGEL FESTIVAL

Taylor Carrell, tuba • 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 also 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 at other new music venues worldwide. Yet, as far as aesthetics were concerned, Kagel refused to blindly accept integral serialism, the idiom which Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, and their colleagues had established in the early 1950s. They of course had been intrigued by the philosophy of American experimentalist John Cage—had even invited him to lecture at their Darmstadt stronghold—but they remained hesitant to borrow too much from him. In other words, Stockhausen and Boulez never became "experimental" composers themselves. They always worked within a conventional definition of music as something concerned with sound and the structuring of sound, no matter how much they expanded this definition from within.

Kagel, however, might be considered a true experimentalist, regardless of his acceptance into 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 whom we know them to be and ignored the fiction unfolding on stage which we are taught from childhood to accept. 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*, operas composed in the mid-1970s, each adapt some aspects of Kagel's *Staatstheater*.)

Staatstheater also demonstrates another important aspect of Kagel's idiom: 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, *Mirum* for solo tuba, dates from 1965. Its score consists of a series of disconnected musical staves which Björn Heile in his biography of Kagel likens to "a compendium of the possibilities of monody." In his view, the score is essentially a catalog of musical phrases which a solo, monophonic instrument like the tuba can play. That the phrases are disconnected visually is reinforced aurally by the large amounts of silence between motives which are also notated, although imprecisely. Critic Andrew Clements gives a less neutral take than Heile in an article for *The Guardian*. Clements outlines the theatrical scenario of *Mirum* as follows: "A soloist tries desperately to turn his elephantine instrument into something that can sing and assert itself. Eventually he gives up, delivers a poem to the audience about the beauties of the tuba, and stalks out of the hall." While Heile also comments on the theatrical element, he describes no plight by the frustrated musician who evidently made an unfortunate choice of instruments somewhere along the way. The poem mentioned by Clements integrates the familiar Latin text that Kagel puns in the title of his piece. *Tuba mirum spargens sonum* and the several lines which follow belong to the Roman Catholic Requiem, or Mass for the Dead, and specifically its *Dies irae* sequence. They translate as, "The horn will send its wondrous sound throughout the Earth's sepulchers and gather all before the throne." Clearly *Mirum* conjures a different result, especially if we accept Clements' interpretation, as even the tubist gets frustrated with his sound and marches offstage.

After *Mirum*, we hear *General Bass*, a work composed from 1971 to 1972 and described as suitable for any instrument capable of producing continuous sounds in the prescribed range. That range is low, as the title implies, but this does not mean that instruments must produce sounds in this range exclusively. Indeed the score mentions organ, cello, and bandoneon, an instrument similar to the accordion, as ideal; and all of these instruments can also player higher than the notated music. Emphasis is also on continuity, and the score advises against woodwind and brass instruments like the bassoon and trombone whose players would have to take breaths and interrupt the long, slow phrases which Kagel seeks. Although *General Bass* can be played by one solo instrument, the score indicates that two or more instruments can play in alternation, switching with each other at rests. If played by one instrument, however, the performer should occasionally adjust his own timbre so as to create the feeling of polyphony all by itself. Although Kagel leaves these largescale elements for the players to determine, he is more insistent on the mood and content of the piece. No pathos is to be added while pitches and dynamics are also to be followed to the letter. The content is mostly slow and mood unexpressive, but this gives the performers and listeners alike the chance to really focus and experience the nuances of the sounds created. The theatrical aspect arises from this forced listening space which, like Cage's infamous "silent" piece, *4'33"*, is actually much livelier than one would expect from the sparse notation.

The next work on our program was 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 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, avoided in more traditional music, are here 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; its optional staging, however, grants this composition a more pervasive theatricality.

Last we witness *Dressur*, a percussion trio completed in 1977 as part of Kagel's instrumental theatre cycle, *Quatre degrés*. In his biography, Heile comments 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*."

About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer studies music librarianship at Indiana University where he is the recipient of a May Copeland Fellowship and Luddy Research Award. In Bloomington, he is employed at the Cook Music Library of the Jacobs School of Music and at the Archives of Traditional Music. His first master's is in Music History and Literature from the University of Louisville where he was a recipient of the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship and wrote a thesis entitled, "Liminal Aesthetics: Perspectives on Harmony and Timbre in the Music of Olivier Messiaen, Tristan Murail, and Kaija Saariaho." His latest project, "Uncharted Territories: Collection Development of Unfamiliar Musical Idioms, and a Practical Case for Spectral Music," was presented at the Music Library Association national conference in March 2022. Jackson has previously shared research at two meetings of the South-Central Chapter of the American Musicological Society; the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival; the Music by Women Festival; and the University of Louisiana System Academic Summit. A composition of his has also been premiered at New Music on the Bayou. As an arts programmer, he has served as Director of Scholarship to the Sugarmill Music Festival, Series Director to Abendmusik Alexandria, and Marketing Chair to the Chamber Music Society of Louisville. He is also a freelance concert annotator, music blogger, CD collector, avid reader, and award-winning nature photographer.

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