MAURICIO KAGEL

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Material received:

Die Mutation
Universal Edition 15605, 1976 (£3.00)

Kantrimiusik
Universal Edition 15919, 1975 (£17.50)

Mare Nostrum
Universal Edition 15951, 1975 (£15.00)

GETTING TO GRIPS with Mauricio Kagel and his work is no easy task. He has turned his multivalent and seemingly inexhaustible imagination to conventional and unconventional ensembles both instrumental and vocal, to tape and disc, to radio and television, to theatre with and without actors and to the making of several films. Many of his works exist in several versions, have satellite pieces or exist only as potential material with more or less defined guidelines for their realisation (e.g. *Pandorasbox* (1960 . . .), *Tremens* (1963-65), *Kommentar und Extempore* (1966-67)). To the enormously increased rate of published output in recent years must be added the ongoing revision and even additional composition of earlier work. Thus the diversity and sheer volume of material conspire to deny any coherent understanding before the fabric of Kagel's composition is even considered.

Furthermore, the dearth of performances, at least on this side of the Channel — due to technical, economic and a host of other factors — means that the experience of many a work is substantially robbed of the context of Kagel's development. And this context is vital: Kagel, perhaps more than any other living

composer, conceives of his entire output as a single work-in-progress; many pieces (often individually in statu nascendi) have a complex conceptual underlay which is impenetrable without the illumination of certain earlier works. The result is inevitable: many a listener clutching at straws will appreciate only a superficial or partial aspect at the expense of all others (such as Kagel's sense of humour — often remarked upon) or will dismiss the work as incomprehensible if not downright silly, and Kagel as a charlatan.

Kagel is not accustomed to venerate sacred cows; the reappraisal of Beethoven implicit in *Ludwig Van* (1969) — in particular the film version — has apparently been a source of some discomfort for certain musically pious audiences. *Die Mutation* (1971) for male chorus and obligato piano takes for almost all its text about 80 titles from Bach's (371) *Four-Part Chorales.* These are distributed between a speaking and a singing chorus for the time it takes the pianist to perform the A minor Prelude, No. 44 of the *48* (about six minutes with both repeats taken). Each title spoken or whispered by the speaking chorus is frequently shadowed by a Sprechgesang of certain of its phonetic components in the singing chorus; eventually the roles are reversed and speaking chorus doubles singing chorus as the phonetic resonance assimilates first vowels and nasals, then liquids and sibilants and finally stops ('t' and 'g') which, drawn out in long spoken glissandi, lend the texture some unstable and not altogether pleasant edges. The second half of the Prelude proceeds by rigorous inversion of the first, and from this point (p.17) the mutation from supplication and naive affirmation (the chorale titles torn away from Bach's music are almost embarrassingly trite) to doubt, cynicism and finally heresy gathers inexorable momentum. A direct quotation from Berg's *Wozzeck* ('Der Herr sprach: lasset die Kleinen zu mir kommen') is answered by a raucous tutti 'Wir kommen' (p.30) and a communal shout of 'Heil!' is prefaced by a vulgar 'Sieg!'. Chorale 55 (Riemenschneider Edition) and *Wozzeck* Act II, Scene 1 are dovetailed to produce 'Wir arme Christenleut' and finally the synthesis is neatly completed between the last scene of the opera and chorales 239 and 53: 'Dein Vater, dort oben, ist tot!/Hopp, hopp! Hopp, hopp! Hopp, hopp!/Das neugeborene Kindlein ist tot!'.

Whereas in his Violin Concerto Berg quoted and assimilated Bach, Kagel here has Bach quote Berg and effectively devours them both. Given the clear vocal elocution which Kagel specifically requests and the necessary working knowledge of *Wozzeck, Die Mutation* should make its various musical and theological points: though the latter will these days doubtless not provoke a *Ludwig Van*-type reaction ('after all, it's only religion, isn't it?').

Kantrimiusik and *Mare Nostrum* are altogether more ambitious projects; written between 1973 and 1975 they run for about 40 minutes and over an hour respectively. Although *Kantrimiusik* may be performed in a concert version, both include a substantial theatrical component. *Kantrimiusik* requires a small ensemble of clarinet, trumpet, tuba, violin, piano, two guitars and at least three singers, and consists of eight movements with seven interludes ('Intermedia'). These form a programme of entertainment of the type frequently offered by those ensembles of the light music industry who come under the heading 'Folk' (sub-category 'Arrangements'). However, Kagel says that the piece deliberately makes no claims to use authentic sources but, on the contrary, aims to process conventional apocryphal musical art further, in an aesthetic way. One's orientation is therefore rarely decisive: in the second movement, essentially vocal ornamentation, strummed guitar chords and traces of a flat supertonic hint at Spain or Mexico; the third movement, with its slightly bas-relief piano line in thirds and octaves casting pale grey shadows in the other parts, includes a tape of rural sounds which is a composite of peaceful woods on a winter's day and quiet forest in summer. Only occasionally is the situation a little more overt: the fifth movement has a band playing a waltz ad absurdum while, on tape, a tremendous storm builds up. In the tumult of nature the musicians play on unperturbed; all becomes peaceful again, but then the waltz comes to an abrupt end. The short 'Intermedia', generally in a reduced scoring, centre on the singers: each piece is in a different language with opaque texts verging on the absurd.

If on one level, however, this score exudes semantic indefinition, the meticulous detail of the composition and the remarkable clarity of musical objects and processes cannot be ignored. Just as in *Die Mutation* Kagel requests clear vocal enunciation, so here he demands a high degree of responsibility from both musicians and stage designer: 'The pseudo-popular character of certain movements, their ambiguous, vague folk-lore should not in any way lead to ambiguous production. The degree of parody and caricature or independent seriousness which is present should be clearly audible from every accurate musical interpretation.' Theatrically, apart from the use of life-size inflatable plastic dolls, the 'leading role' of *Kantrimiusik* is played by a piece of stage machinery with flats, curtains, props, screens etc. The visual elements employed are the paraphernalia of folk-lore: a cloud, a gable roof, a redbrick chimney, a mountain with snowy peak and many more. The basic scenic idea is thus 'a slow but continuous metamorphosis of landscapes and typical moods using a limited number of elements which, perpetually juxtaposed in different constellations, enable the synthetic production of "Nature" '. Kagel notes further: 'It is primarily a matter of the illusion of the manipulation of illusion. Whether the resultant landscapes appear artificial or discovered is irrelevant if the scenic method is free of illusion. It would be more important to put together dubious comforts in a poetic form in such a way that their reproduction becomes credible again. In this way space is created for the fantasy of the viewer.' Given that these delicate requirements are fulfilled, a staged performance of *Kantrimiusik* promises to be memorable indeed.

Mare Nostrum, subtitled 'discovery, pacification and conversion of the Mediterranean by an Amazonian tribe', is in certain respects a considerably more complex work than *Kantrimiusik*. The theatrical component is here obligatory and the technical possibilities for its realisation are more precisely mapped out. The basic personnel of counter-tenor, baritone, flute doubling piccolo and alto flute, oboe doubling cor anglais, guitar doubling mandoline and lute, harp and cello is augmented by an extensive catalogue of percussion (including much from South America) deployed by both vocalists and one percussionist.

Reminiscent in size of the resources of *Match* (1964) and *Tremens,* the meticulous differentiation of timbre implied in this arsenal has consequences for the composition as a whole. Substantial sections of *Kantrimiusik* reveal a development of a technique most clearly exemplified in *1898* (commissioned in 1973 for the 75th anniversary of Deutsche Grammophon and available on DG 2543 007); two or three systems of 'instrumental reduction' or 'short score' are used by all performers who realise this ongoing skeleton, with or without multiple-octave transpositions, according to individual points of entry and cut-off. The deployment of timbre becomes primarily a structural concern (somewhat akin to Webern's orchestration of Bach's *Ricercare a 6*). In *1898* it is largely abstract — for any 11-17 players; in *Kantrimiusik* further defined by the more or less specific instrumentation of the 'folk' ensemble. In *Mare Nostrum* the technique still exists in the form of a continuous monody which Kagel however has himself orchestrated and which is often deeply embedded in a complex of other, diverse elements. The technique and its function have thus become progressively more subterranean and in *Mare Nostrum* we find a correspondingly more local attention to instrumental and vocal timbre and its distortions.

Mare Nostrum is an essentially narrative conception. The mise-en-scène comprises the eight performers sitting, surrounded by the audience, around a single element of decor which represents the Mediterranean — which may be realised in any way, from a 4 x 6m. plastic sheet with puddles of water to an actual small pond. The baritone, sitting opposite the counter-tenor, assumes the role of a narrator who participated in the discovery of the Mediterranean, but who at the same time is a descendant of a long-extinct Amazonian tribe. Much of his narration is written in an invented language, a composite of the various ways in which German is spoken by immigrant workers from certain Mediterranean countries. Kagel notes that 'German as a foreign language should here be understood as a symbol of an effort to express oneself credibly, not as mere irony', and to this end he requests that the performer should not invent some quaint accent to accompany the already composed grammatical and other errors, but should speak the text with suitably clear 'stage' delivery in accent-free High German (I foresee translation problems for this score).

The counter-tenor on the other hand represents a typical native of the respective countries discovered in the course of the exploration — although both participants often exchange their functions in the course of the piece, an understandable procedure in view of the inversion of history which is the premise of the work. All in all this is a very characteristic conceptual montage (might one hear in this situation echoes of Kagel's emigration from Buenos Aires to Cologne in 1957?). Beginning with the sighting of land and the discovery of Portugal, the voyage proceeds clockwise, so to speak, to Egypt and the final belly-dance of death where, standing in the 'ocean', the baritone tenderly embraces the counter-tenor, stabs him in the back (lots of stage blood!) and utters a primal scream of victory.

Lack of space precludes a blow-by-blow account of the events of this score: suffice it to say that Kagel's narrative, theatrical and musical imagination is apparently inexhaustible. In all these aspects Kagel tends to work in certain ways: either taking a 'correct' premise and applying 'false' procedures to arrive at absurd results, or taking an unsound premise and applying seemingly logical procedures to obtain equally absurd results. Apart from these compositional methods, however, there exists the dramatic situation of a newcomer from South America attempting to comprehend the conglomerate culture of the Mediterranean. Such an explorer must inevitably impose his own frames of reference upon his experience (just as Europeans did when discovering South American culture). Seen through a different filter, the various national heritages begin to stand in very strange perspectives. The situation, although 'authentic' enough, is already Kagelian, and is the direct motivation for Kagel's compositional technique. Conversely, it is Kagel's technique which structures and makes concrete continuity out of what is only potentially dramatic. In this unstable interplay between compositional method and given situation, *Mare Nostrum* treads its unpredictable path.

Tradition and convention are central concerns of Kagel's work. These encompass a singular awareness of his own previous output, attempts to reappraise composers of the past (*Ludwig Van, Variations without a Fugue on Brahms' Variations on a theme of Handel* (1971-72)) and the re-examination of the conventions of music-making (*Sur Scène* (1959-60), *Match*). The more recent works are no exception, but Kagel's material means have altered significantly. The use of a regular rhythmic pulse, albeit in asymmetric modules and latent in the output of the late 60s, has become further refined; consonance (most notably octaves) but with the corrective of 'false relations' is strongly in evidence both melodically (diatonic, chromatic and modal patterns) and harmonically (triads). One might hear faint echoes of Satie or middle-period Stravinsky in this ultimately static, detached music. But there is, as always in Kagel, a strong 'negative' element whereby patterns are set up only to be nudged out of line, expectations never completely fulfilled. One could call the work neither affirmative nor restorative (affirmation being a hallmark of restoration) and should shy away from attaching any 'neo'-labels, however tempting after a first hearing.

This new type of material seems to me to have at least two functions. First, the increased clarity of the musical image means that Kagel's techniques of montage, heterophony (the bundling together of diverse material processes), transition both as linear transformation and internal convergence between heterophonic layers, and modulation as the alteration in perception effected by the interaction of one layer with another are, *aurally,* much more readily available. Even in *Tremens,* Kagel's music seems to stand in the shadow of integral serialism, so much so that the vital substructure is virtually irretrievable from the flood of surface information. In relation to the sound of certain earlier works (which was in retrospect often remarkably unremarkable) Kagel would now appear to have made considerable concessions to what might be called aural polish; but this seems to go hand in hand with the realisation that a clear image need not necessarily negate Kagel's demands for deep and active participation from the listener. It is precisely because the bones of his recent music are so much more apparent that Kagel's often ambiguous conceptual challenges should tend to override any possible superficial consumer anaesthesia.

Secondly, his current musical materials would seem to have developed primarily from an examination of more conventional music, particularly the use of musical 'objets trouvés', and by the same token are eminently more suitable means for the criticism of existing conventions than were his earlier methods. *Anagrama* is serialism deliberately taken to absurd extremes and as such is an implicit critique of the techniques of the time, but who was in a position to hear that in 1960? Though not setting up a 'language' (that, in Kagel, would be the ultimate irony), the musical means he has been working with of late would seem to have considerably more potential than before.

Finally, one reservation. Since music is a social activity, Kagel's ongoing critique of music and musicians has, logically, taken him further afield. *Mare Nostrum* includes a rather heavy-handed statement on water pollution, centred in this instance on Marseilles (members of the ensemble dump various substances and items of refuse into the 'Mediterranean' in the course of the piece). The resulting protest appears at best embarrassing and at worst cynically easy. Kagel, in common with many another contemporary artist, might do well to reconsider the use of crude polemic in the service of watery social criticism.

NOTE:

[1] *Music and Musicians* has contained some of the most informed (as well as pretty well the only!) writing about Kagel in this country. Richard Toop's 'Social Critic in Music', *M&M,* Vol. 22, No. 9 (May 1974), pp. 36-38, is introductory in nature. In *M&M,* Vol. 22, No. 12 (August 1974), pp. 41-44, Adrian Jack reviews the London concert in May that Toop's article was intended to introduce: and does it with the aid of the composer in the form of an interview. Nouritza Matossian's 'The New Music Theatre', *M&M,* Vol. 25, No. 1 (September 1976), pp. 22-24, brings things a little more up to date with discussion of *Bestiarium* and *Two-man Orchestra* which have not yet been seen in this country but which Miss Matossian has seen in Germany. For readers of German, Dieter Schnebel's book *Mauricio Kagel: Musik Theater Film* (Cologne: Verlag M. DuMont Schauberg, 1970) is still very useful. (Ed.)