# 9204-KAG

# The New Music-Theatre of Mauricio Kagel

*Research project by Zachàr Laskewicz*

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**MAURICIO KAGEL**  is an Argentine composer, film maker, dramatist, and performer.   As his involvement with such a wide range of media suggests, he has produced a new and entirely individual body of compositions that almost defy classification.  We can thank Kagel for revolutionary work in the new music-theatre genre, particularly 'Instrumental Theatre', of which Kagel has been the most determinant and influential exponent, proposing a music in which the action of performers contributes as much as their sound.[1]   Examining Kagel's work is not an easy task, if only because of the lack of homogeneity.  The startling contrasts between works composed for ensembles of unheard of instrumental combinations, theatre pieces where music as conventionally defined has almost evaporated, or films which are anything but simple documentations of musical performances presents problems that take careful and detailed examination.

Kagel, though he writes and talks extensively about music, has frequently made clear his anti-theoretical bias.  If one sees that as an anti-authoritarian trait, then maybe this is because of a lasting reaction to the political conditions of his native Argentina, where he lived from 1931 to 1957.  Over twenty  years ago he wrote of the "uninterrupted political catastrophe that has choked Argentina for almost 30 years . . . the series of miserable régimes and dictatorships . . .  the endless chain of miscalculations, self-pity, betrayal, deficiencies and imperfections accomplished by those men, unworthy of humanity, who surround themselves with jack-boots and hierarchically polished metal whom one simply terms 'the military'."  This could very well be an influencing bias in his work, but even more undoubtably so is a deepened empathy with a characteristically German mode of thought, after living in Cologne for more than forty years.  In Germany dialectical thinking has since Hegel been an official philosophical tradition whose hallmark is the refusal to accept the existing order as the only and permanent one.  But in an increasingly administered society the inherently anti-systematic character of dialectical criticism grows more pronounced.  Adorno has written about the most extreme expression of this tendency:

> *Limitation and reservation are no way to represent the dialectic.  Rather, the dialectic advances by way of extremes, driving thoughts with the utmost consequentiality to the point where they turn back on themselves, instead of qualifying them.  The prudence that restrains us from venturing too far ahead in a sentence, is usually an agent of social control, and so of stupefaction.*[2]

It is in this context that Kagel's often startling musical formulations are to be understood.  What might be termed Kagel's 'systematically unsystematic' approach is evident in each individual work.  His works generally display indifference towards the traditional categories of unity, stylistic purity, and absence of inner contradictions.

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[1] Stanley Sadie ed., "Mauricio Kagel," The New Grove Dictionary of Music, Macmilan Publishers 1980.

[2] Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia, (trans. E.F.F. Jephcott), New Left Books 1974.

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Kagel wrote in 1968 that "Europeans have as a time honoured custom been in the habit of codifying musical history far too quickly."[3]  In numerous manifestos and articles, contemporary composers and academics have relentlessly defined schools, assigned influences, and attached aesthetic labels to phenomena which grow ever more distant from the comfortable, conventional terminology.  This profusion of descriptive and critical language aims at masking a basic impulse: the desire to construct categories into which the musical phenomena can painlessly disappear.  All of Kagel's output stands opposed to such classification and to a large extent eludes it, however, Kagel's work also essentially stands opposed to Dada and Cageian concepts of attempting to erase memory and therefore the past; to begin afresh.  Each of Kagel's work is inseparably bound to tradition, primarily musical but also theatrical and cinematic.  But Kagel, when working, reworking, or integrating such a genre, he neither blindly perpetuates nor contemptuously dismisses this tradition, although the final product often questions the nature and conventions of the traditions he is working with.  Therefore, the only way to truly examine Kagel's work is to relate it to the traditions and anti-traditions that have influenced him.


Opera, as we know it, arose out of the attempts of a group of artists and scholars in 1600 to recreate Greek drama, which was believed at the time to have been sung and not spoken.  Recitative or the sung narrative was a new device and was the precursor of dramatic dialogue.  The conceptual foundations of opera were laid when music began to carry the burden of dramatic development instead of merely comprising incidental ornamentation and ballet music. Gradually more  characters were introduced into the plots, the size of the orchestra grew, dance was incorporated, and scenic effects became ambitious.   The disparate elements which made up such a spectacle were to become more unified and individual as the social function became more detached from the work of art itself.  Music became more central to the drama, while the libretto shifted from allegorical, pastoral and magical themes to tackle more substantial topics.  Thus opera in the later 18th century outgrew the Renaissance classical themes, and began to comment on real life and its problems, for instance Joseph II banned *Le Nozze di Figaro*  for being too liberally peppered with revolutionary issues.  Despite historical changes of style and idea, the cohesion of drama and music continued well into the Romantic period.  Wagner believed that music and drama had not achieved a real unity either in the Renaissance or through later reforms.  The culmination of this strong drive toward unity and cohesion in music and drama was Wagner's ideal for the art of the future, the *Gesamtkuntswerk.*.[4]  His work was highly influential to the development of the operatic form, although his glorified visions have been brought under much criticism because of its preservation of the traditional and elaborate conventions of opera rather than a true fusion of the arts.


Wassily Kandinsky, an artist who made a great impression on German expressionist theatre, was the first the first to openly criticise the *Gesamtkuntswerk*  of Wagner, to the extent that it only served to unify by external means - never really aiming at true fusion:  At times making the music prominent, at times the text,  and never considering colour and pictorial form.   In 1912, Franz Marc (a 40 year old painter) and Kandinsky edited the publication *The Blaue Reiter Almanac* , in which two of his own documents were published.  The first was called *On Stage Composition*  and was designed to accompany a transcript of his revolutionary stage work *Der gelbe Klang*  (the yellow sound). Kandinsky's work on *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*  in 1912, set forth an aesthetic philosophy involving a merging of the arts through their common disposition to abstraction and pursuit of inner nature.  This became a rallying point for modern artists of the avant-garde.  In *On*

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[3] Mauricio Kagel, "Tam-Tam: Dialoge und Monologe zur Musik," Piper and Co. Verlag, 1975.

[4] Nouritza Matossian, "the new music theatre," <u>Music and Musicians</u>, (Sept. '76)

*Stage Composition* his criticisms of Wagner were made manifest.  He describes the external development of stage works into three classes: Drama, Opera, and Ballet.  He saw this as a consequence of materialism which resulted inevitably in restriction of artistic expression. He continued to describe how his own work broke down these restricting barriers, and created another three distinctions that were used for their inner value rather than for external means:

> 1. *Musical sound and its movement.*
> 2. *Bodily spiritual sound and its movement, expressed by people and objects.*
> 3. *Colour-tones and their movements (a special resource of the stage).*

Thus ultimately drama consists here of the complex nature of inner experiences of the spectator.  From opera has been taken the principle element music as the source of inner sounds, which need in no way be subordinated to the external progress of the action.  From ballet has been taken dance, which is used as movement that produces an abstract effect with an inner sound.  Colour-tones take on an independent significance and are treated as a means of equal importance.[5] Music, sound, voices, forms and coloured lights would move, assemble and decompose.  They would work their effects sometimes simultaneously, sometimes separately.  Forms would appear, develop and vanish, while colours changed through shifting lights.  The colour and light would not serve to illustrate the music more than the music served to comment on the drama - all would rest precisely on the action common among all elements.  The method allowed for numerous combinations of effect: collaboration, contrast, or the three 'movements' running in entirely separate, externally independent directions.  *Der gelbe Klang*  goes beyond the anti-naturalistic experiments of Jarry, Apia, Strinberg, Craig and Panizza in its almost complete elimination of dialogue, plot and sequential action, and its reliance on light, movement, and the abstract  dances of figures to fill the space of the stage and the duration of the performance.  The play has been objected to, misunderstood and dismissed.

Kandinsky's reaction against Wagner's *Gesamtkuntswerk* , as well as his move towards abstraction, is echoed directly in Kagel's work.  His output includes films and plays for radio and the stage in addition to his music, a many-sided activity whose aim has not been as such to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk,*  but rather explore the means by which ideas and forms might be transferred from one medium to another. Expressionism is an important influence to Kagel's work, and it is also interesting to note a comparison between Kandinsky's influential work for the German expressionist theatre and Kagel's continuing work for the new music-theatre, in the divisions in the fusing of the stage-arts.  In 1979, Kagel wrote of contemporary composition:

> *With regard to current developments, even allowing for caution about premature codifying, one fundamental feature can be observed:- the breaking up of traditional boundaries of genres and typologies, the clearest case being that of the new music-theatre.  The various branches of traditional theatre - stage-play, opera, melodrama and ballet, - have increasingly dissolved out of their rigid divisions into a continuous scale of scenic representation.*

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[5] Kandinsky and Schoenberg, <u>Letter, Pictures and Documents</u>, Faber and Faber Ltd,  translation published 1984.

 At the end of the 19th century a form of salon entertainment became all the rage in Europe.  It was the 'melodrama', which - contrary to popular usage - was a precise artistic form:  the recitation or declamation of a poem or dramatic story by an actor accompanied by an ensemble or a piano illustrating the text.  Berlioz, Schubert, Schumann and Liszt composed melodramas, and the form was well suited to both concert hall and salon.[6]   These melodramas  were engendered by a yearning for certain kinds of expression, by a love for the beauty of the speaking and declaiming voice, by a desire for the heightened intelligibility of the text, as well as by the wish to create a more subtle interpretation than was thought possible through traditional operatic delivery[7] :  Melodrama was a form that also stood against the traditions of opera.  Arnold Schoenberg, and important composer of the early twentieth century composed his revolutionary work *Pierrot Lunaire*  in 1912.  It was subtitled "a melodrama for speaking voice," and was undoubtably influenced by this form. Its primary contribution to the avant-garde was that is was the first work to introduce his *Sprechstimme,*   a form of vocal notation that combined speech with song.  Kagel has also worked with the melodrama form, and has similarly used it as a reaction against traditional operatic forms of representation.  *Phonophonie*  (1963/64), is a work containing four melodramas for two performers and other sources of sound, and it is designed to represent a 19th century singer at the time of his vocal decline.   Based on authentic reviews and reports from the past, this composition extends the 'melodrama'  by using alternative types of representation, totally abandoning the texts in the traditional form.  The two performers represent four roles, the first performer playing three of the characters (represented through rapid alternation presented by dramatic implications in the text),  and the second performer plays the fourth role -  the deaf/dumb mute who is forced to represent his character through abstract movement and actions.[8]  For an audience, it becomes the seemingly accidental events of human existence that constitute the subject matter.  Below is an excerpt from the score:



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[6] ibid.

[7] Istvan Anhalt, Alternative Voices, University of Toronto Press 1984.

[8] Mauricio Kagel, Phonophonie, vier Melodramen für zwei Stimmen und andere Schallquellen (score), Universal Edition 13519.

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The fairly abstract representation of material by Kagel in *Phonophonie* brings us to a fairly important influence on Kagel's work: The Dada movement that began in 1916 in Zurich. Dada found expression primarily through experimentation with performance, the group set up a performance space called the 'Cabaret Voltaire', where most of the early experiments took place. Performance at the Cabaret Voltaire included dances and skits - many employing masked performers, work with rhythm, music and 'natural sound' (those sounds which the human voice and body is capable of making without the aid of extensions of any kind), bruitism (noise music) and the reading of typically Dada poetry. Dada was meant to be principally a focus for an abstract art, and it had an absurd expression. Tristan Tzara, an important founder of the movement, wrote: "Dada is our intensity: it sets up inconsequential bayonets the sumatran head of the German baby; ... It is for and against unity and definitely against the future."[9] Both in their theatrical exploration of simultaneity and the use of noise, and in their early attempts to agitate the audience, the Cabaret Voltaire was not treading on entirely new ground. Noise had already been christened as an art form by the Futurists. In 1913 Luigi Russolo had written a manifesto entitled *The Art of Noise,* which posited that Western culture to date had accepted only a narrow segment of those infinite possibilities of sound that make music; all sound should be acceptable material for music.[10]

Hugo Ball, an important Dada poet, invented poems without words or sound poems, in which he composed with the sonic qualities of vowels and consonants as the composer does with tones and instrumental timbres.[11] Ball was particularly influenced by the work of Kandinsky and his publication *The Blaue Reiter Almanac.* Here new thoughts were forcefully presented and Ball encountered the theories of Robert Delauney's 'simultaneism' which was to affect his concept of simultaneous poetry and therefore the entire nature of Dada performance. The importance of simultaneism was in its new grasp of structure - a structure which is the 'opposite of narration,' which represented "an effort to retain a moment of experience without sacrificing its logically unrelated variety." Simultaneism wanted to present a plurality of actions at the same time. Abridged syntax and unpunctuated abruptness tended to merge disparate moments into an instance. Passages were set one next to another to encourage a feeling of conflict between them rather than the link. From here it is a short jump to obscurity, illogicality and abruptness, therefore surprise, shock, and 'chance'. The elements of "chance" and the "spontaneous act" took on a new significance for the performing artist. Chance was the basis of Tzara's paper-bag poetry, and much of Arp's as well.

> *I tore apart sentences, words, syllables. I tried to break down the language into atoms, in order to approach the creative . . .Chance opened up perceptions to me, immediate spiritual insights.*

It was the Dada who took simultaneism to its most complete extension in the area of performance. On March 30th 1916 the first simultaneous poem was performed at the Cabaret Voltaire:

> *A contrapuntal recitative in which three or more voices speak, sing, whistle etc., simultaneously in such a way that the resulting combinations account for the total effect of the work, elegiac, funny or bizarre.*

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[9] ibid.

[10] Annabelle Melzer, <u>Latest Rage the Big Drum</u>, UMI Research Press 1980.

[11] Istvan Anhalt, <u>Alternative Voices</u>, University of Toronto Press 1984.

Experiments in simultaneity led to multiple voices reading poems and manifestos, and the simultaneous reading of unrelated texts (often in different languages).  The phonetic poem had become "an act of respiratory and auditive combinations, firmly tied to a unit of duration."  The performers wheezed, gasped, wailed and sputtered out the letters and sounds.  In Kandinsky's experiments with poems devoid of semantic meaning, called *Klänge* (sounds), the sound of the human voice was applied in pure fashion, "without being darkened by the word, by the meaning of the word."  Poems from this collection were recited for the first time at the Cabaret Voltaire.  The common linguistic denominator of the group was absolute sound, and when he was ready to transcend sound, the Dada-poet performer moved onto noise.

> *Noises are existentially more powerful than the human voice . . .the noises represent the inarticulate, inexorable and ultimately decisive forces which constitute the background. The poem carries the message that mankind is swallowed up in a mechanistic process.  In a generalized and compressed form it represents the battle of the human voice against a  world whose rhythms and whose din are inescapable.*

Ball composed a noise-concert for shawms and little bells, baby rattles, and chants for a human chorus.  He was perfectly aware of the primitive and 'magical' import of his metrical phonetic experiments:

> *We have charged the word with forces and energies which made it possible for us to rediscover the evangelical concept of the 'word'(logos) as a magical complex of images.*

Through the elements of chance, simultaneous performance, brutist music, and phonetic poetry, including the use of instruments that go far beyond any traditional concepts, we can see a direct translation and interpretation in Kagel's work.   Aspects of simultaneous performance and experimentation with word fragmentation can be seen even his earlier works.  *Anagrama-1* (1957-58) was composed for four solo voices, speaking chorus and ensemble.  The 'text' of the work consists of the vowels and consonants of a palindrome 'in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni' (we are circling in the night and are devoured by fire), from the *Divine Comedy*, translated into four languages.  Kagel points out that "here language and music are combined in a vocabulary that displays their correlations and reciprocal aspects."[12]   The power of this work is most certainly derived from the power of the vocal sounds rather than the meaning of the words themselves.  Similarities can also be noted through Kagel's use of multiple languages, unusual instrumental accompaniment, and all manner of vocal recitations (whispering, speaking, singing, gasping, guttural sounds and so on). An excerpt from the score is shown overleaf:

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[12] Michael Blake, "Kagel at the Almeida", Contact - a journal of contemporary music, No 33.

ANAGRAMA I
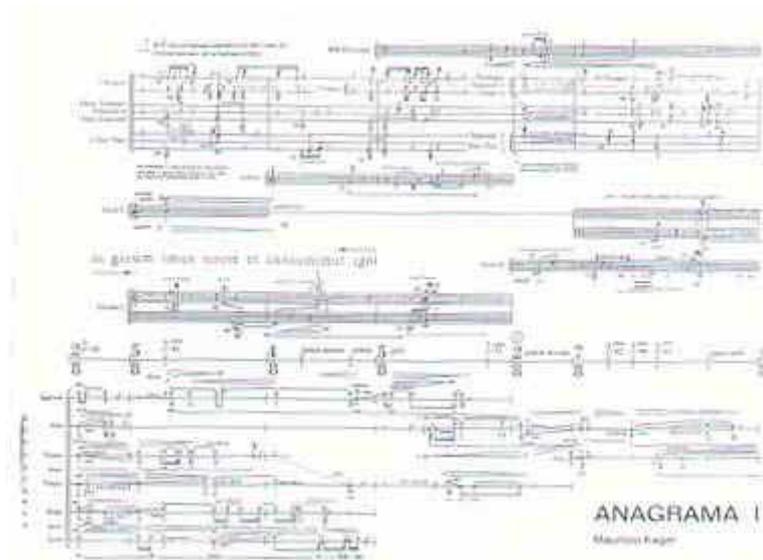
The Dada movement undoubtably changed the face of contemporary art.  Expressions of suggestive unintelligibility and absurdity from Dada were turned into powerful artistic statements by composers such as John Cage.  Cage's rediscovery of the Dada sensibility and introduction into the music world spread widely, revealing new aspects and fresh possibilities not only in music, but in painting, sculpture, literature, dance and drama.[13]  Cage made an entrance into Europe in 1958, and composers were thrilled by the glad tidings of structurelessness and aleatoric music, which contributed substantially to the demise of strict musical forms and the development of European music-theatre.  When he suggested that the terms 'sound' and 'music' were interchangeable (any sound is music and any music is sound), he revolutionized the musical world.  Therefore, all sounds are legitimate and admissible, whether conventionally musical or otherwise, directly reminiscent of Russolo's *The Art of Noise.*  Cage's most influential musical philosophy was his belief in the the potential musical nature of 'actions'.  A performer's body, gestures, speech, and actions are an extension of his instruments, an enlargement of its personality.  Cage's music can therefore involve players in speech, movement, and gestures; in theatricalisms which are quite alien to the almost impersonal 'white tie and tails' tradition of formal music.  He is one of the first composers to so openly include theatrical elements in his compositions.  His *Theatre Piece*  (1960) may be performed by from one to eight people.  Actions are to be made within certain time periods, the actions being chosen from a range of twenty nouns or verbs.  The result is a display of unassociated actions and situations, an assault on the senses of incoherent and inconsequential material which must be observed impartially and dispassionately.[14]  Meanings that are found are purely there because the listener has found them.

The entrance of John Cage into Europe in 1958 had a profound effect on Kagel's work, providing him with new freedom in working with his medium.  The theatrical inclinations of his work *Antithese*  (1962) reflect one of Kagel's interest in Cageian/Dada concepts, namely that the production of music in the concert hall consists not only of sounds that are heard, but also of actions which are seen.  This is a direct result of involvement with Cage's performances in Europe.  In Kagel's work. there is no longer any question of the player's visible actions being a subsidiary factor:  Sound and action are treated as two autonomous fields, sometimes working in harness together, sometimes contradicting or subverting one another.  *Antithese*  is a piece for one performer with electronic and public sounds.  To the accompaniment of a prerecorded

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[13] Peter Yates, "Performance-Art Music," <u>Twentieth Century Music</u>, George Allen and Unwin Ltd 1968.

[14] Reginald Smith Brindle, "Theatre", <u>The New Music</u>, Second ed. Oxford University Press 1987.

soundtrack, the performer carries out a series of apparently random and inconsequential actions on stage. Like *Theatre Piece,* the performer is given a certain number of options as to when and in which manner the actions take place, and Kagel wrote in the score that "it is the audience's business to find connections between actions and sounds."[15]   Below is a diagram of the options available to the performer:
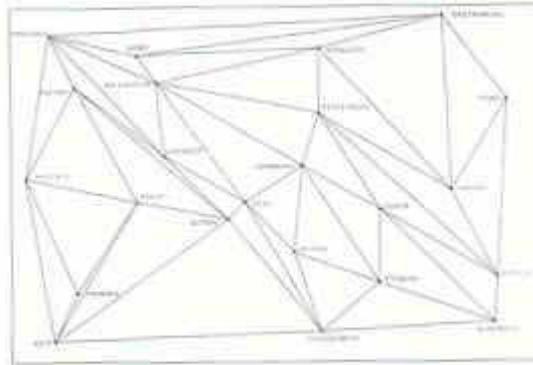


Kagel's work, however, goes beyond this freedom in performance, or rather, he has extended some of the random elements of Dada/Cageian performance and incleded them in his own compositions, which acheive more than a single random event or 'happening'. His music thrives on contradictions between what is seen and what is heard. In *Transicion II,* for a pianist and a percussionist who plays the piano's interior, certain episodes are recorded during the performance and then re-played during a subsequent structure. The results are intentionally confusing: The composition starts off with a situation in which the assortment of beaters used by the percussionist, and his frantic movements in order to carry out all the prescribed actions in the given length of time, direct one's attention to the clear relation between gesture and sound - but suddenly, because of the tape, there are too many sounds to be accounted for by the actions one sees. At another point the percussionist's actions produce no sound of their own: they merely interfere with the sounds produced by the pianist. In his work *Sonant* (1960), the reverse happens: there are too many actions and too few sounds. In the section *Piece touchée, Piece jouée* an elaborate and precisely notated score is mimed by all but one of the players. Overleaf is an excerpt from the *Sonant* score, from the movement *Fin II,* where he is using Cageian 'aleatoric' notation:

The most formative influence on Kagel's work came not from Futurism or Dada, but the Surrealist performance movement which let to the Theatre of the Absurd in the fifties. In 1924 André Breton, one of the members of the first Surrealist groups, published his first manifesto on Surrealism, beginning with a definition of the term:

> *SURREALISM.  Psychic automism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express - verbally, by means of the written work, or in any other manner - the actual functioning of thought.  Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.*

> *ENCYCLOPEDIA. Philosophy. Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested plan of thought.  It tends to ruin once and for all all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life.*

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[15] Mauricio Kagel, Antithese (score), Henry litolff's verlag 1962.

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Below is an excerpt from one of the first Surrealist texts, *S'il Vous Plait* (if you please), from *The Magnetic Fields* (1919), written by Breton and Philippe Souppalt.

> **Gilda:**  *Are your eyes really that colour?*
> **Maxime:**  *Elbow on the table like naughty children.  The fruit of a*
>    *Christian primary education, if books didn't lie, everything*
>    *is golden.*
> **Gilda:**   *In the huts of fishermen one finds those artificial bouquets*
>    *made up of periwinkles and even a bunch of grapes.*
> **Maxine:**  *The globe must be lifted up if it is not transparent enough.*

Here are the multiple 'short-circuits' which Breton discusses in his Second Manifesto of Surrealism, here is the sabotaging of the usual 'insanities' which form the realistic current of life.  Similarly,  silent movies of the twenties and thirties made an indelible impression on modern sensibility, and their own blend of Surrealism brought a new freedom and audacity in the face of theatrical convention. Breton  described them as "pure American Dada humour."[16]   Kagel's attraction to Surrealism is most apparent in his film works.  Representation of the dream consciousness is particularly apparent in his film *Match,*  if not only because of the fact that he dreamt the composition on three consecutive nights before the work was composed.  The Surrealist quality of the film is undeniable, with echoes of Cocteau, René Clair and possibly Buñuel.  Bearing in mind the dream origin of Match, what the French poet Supervielle wrote in 1925 seems very apt: "Until now we have never known anything that could so easily assimilate the unlikely.  Film does away with transitions and explanations, it confuses and makes us confuse reality with unreality.  It can disintegrate and reintegrate anything."  The startling results of Match are that the distinction between the dream and concert version are liquidated.  As Kagel wrote: "the reality of the performance may appear to be normal or completely distorted: the difference remains entirely imperceptible."[17]   The Surrealistic background to another of his films, *Ludwig Van,*  is quite perceptible.  One of the strongest images in the film is an imaginary 'Beethoven house', where fragments of Beethoven's music is pasted over all the walls and furniture in a music room.[18]   A part of the film that showed the room being scanned very slowly was edited without sound and screened for a group of sixteen musicians whose task it was to interpret the kinetic notation.  This created a musical collage, that was based on a film collage, that again was based on a collage of Beethoven's music.  The realization of  Kagel's 'score' that was used in his film, and remains one of the landmarks in the area of collage pieces.  His work on a score for Buñuel's Surrealist masterpiece of 1928, *Un Chien Andalou,*  is an example of Kagel's art at its finest.  In his score for strings and tape, played live by an anonymous ensemble, he has created the sort of counterpart for this remarkable film that few other living composers probably could.  He contrasts a fairly traditional, melodic sound in the strings with solitary dog sounds heard over loudspeakers.  Overleaf is a still from his film *Ludwig Van:*

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[16] Annabelle Melzer, <u>Latest Rage the Big Drum</u>, UMI Research Press 1980.

[17] Maurio Kagel, programme note on *Match* for the "Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern," Luzern, 1970.
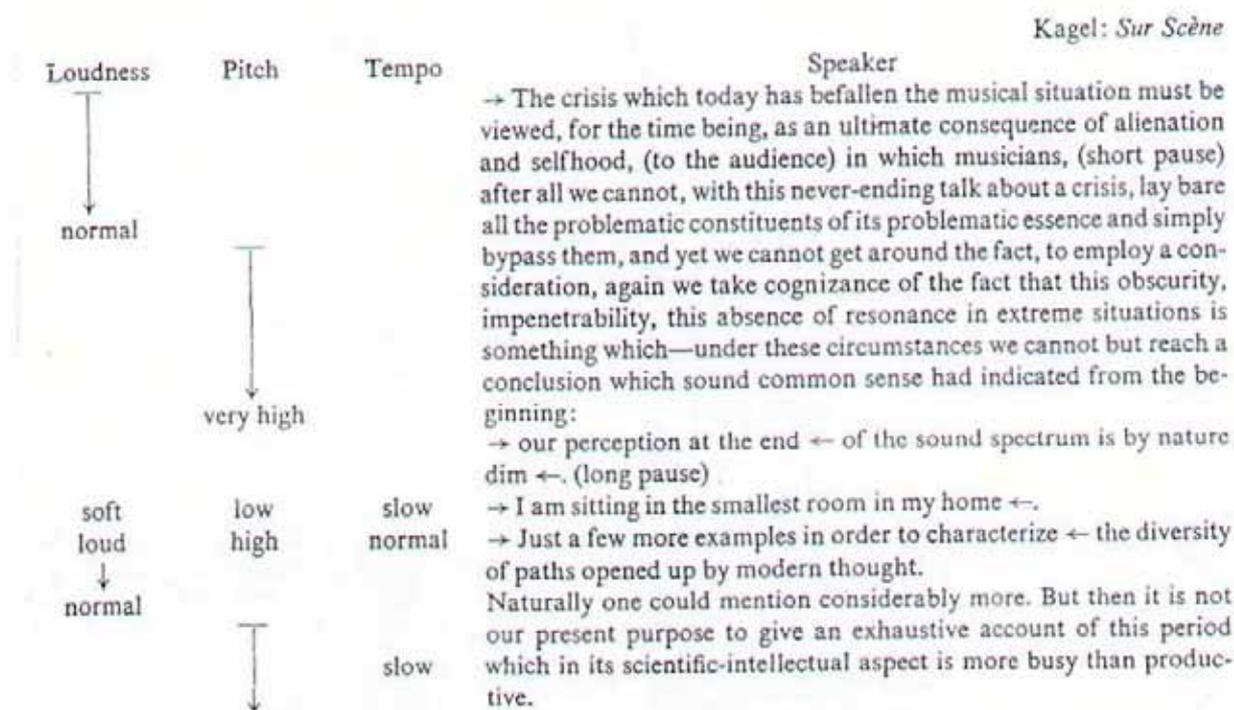
[18] Richard Toop, "social critic in music," <u>Music and Musicians</u>, (May '74).

The plays of a number of dramatists, especially in France during the 1950s, offered a vision of humanity struggling vainly and therefore absurdly to control its fate in a world that seemed in any case bent on destruction.  Certain recurring themes of futility and hopelessness caused them to be labelled the 'absurd' school.  The Theatre of the Absurd has been traced directly from the work of Alfred Jarry, and the Surrealist sketches that occurred in Paris as a result of Jarry's work. Many of the playwrights seek to convey the total inadequacy of words as a means of communication, or the pure difficulty of communication   whether it be through language or otherwise.   The similarity between Kagel's work and some of the Absurd playwrights is quite interesting, and it could be said that he played an important part in the movement itself.  Eugene Ionesco's one act 'anti-play' called *La Cantatrice Chauve*  (published in England as *The Bald Primadonna,*  and first produced in 1950 ) inspired a a major revolution in dramatic techniques, which in fact inaugurated the Absurd movement.[19]   His play used all the clichés of text used in a typical foreign language course, creating a seemingly humorous vocal exterior that hid the dark and menacing themes of the theatre he came to represent.  In Kagel's important early theatre work *Sur Scene*  (1959/60), text is used in a similar way.  A lecturer comes on stage and ostensibly begins a lecture on post-war New Music.  All the familiar academic turns of phrase are present in profusion, but these phrases serve only as embellishments for a kernel of meaning which never actually arrives.  An example from the beginning of the lecture:  'Today, insofar as I should like to call to your attention, it is clear then that once again in the present instance a sense of judgment must dam up and set in order that which is proclaimed a motivating concept, that flood of particularised expressive values, if we are not wholly to be swallowed up by it.'  This use of an particular diversified language form is similar to *La Cantatrice Chauve,*  but soon gains an added dimension as the text is musically 'decomposed':  phrases are omitted, vowels permutated, sentences reversed, but the speaker presses on remorselessly, oblivious to the havoc wrought on his script.  The 'lecture on New Music' is exposed as a framework without content, an institution without a function.[20]   The seemingly humorous exterior reveals Kagel's true negativity about new music criticism.  Overleaf is an extract from the score:

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[19] <u>Encyclopaedia Britannica</u>, "Eugene Ionesco," 15th ed. William Benton Punblishers 1979.

[20] Richard Toop, "social critic in music," <u>Music and Musicians</u>, (May 1974).

Kagel: *Sur Scène*

| Loudness | Pitch | Tempo | Speaker |
|---|---|---|---|

→ The crisis which today has befallen the musical situation must be viewed, for the time being, as an ultimate consequence of alienation and selfhood, (to the audience) in which musicians, (short pause) after all we cannot, with this never-ending talk about a crisis, lay bare all the problematic constituents of its problematic essence and simply bypass them, and yet we cannot get around the fact, to employ a consideration, again we take cognizance of the fact that this obscurity, impenetrability, this absence of resonance in extreme situations is something which—under these circumstances we cannot but reach a conclusion which sound common sense had indicated from the beginning:

→ our perception at the end ← of the sound spectrum is by nature dim ←. (long pause)

→ I am sitting in the smallest room in my home ←.

→ Just a few more examples in order to characterize ← the diversity of paths opened up by modern thought.

Naturally one could mention considerably more. But then it is not our present purpose to give an exhaustive account of this period which in its scientific-intellectual aspect is more busy than productive.

Loudness: normal / soft, loud → normal

Pitch: very high / low, high

Tempo: slow, normal / slow

The similarity between Kagel's non sound based composition *Pas de Cinq* (1965), and absurdist playwright Samuel Beckett's short play called "Quad" (1982) which uses no text, must be the most surprising similarity of all. *Pas de Cinq* is for five performers with walking sticks or umbrellas who must tap out rhythms on a pre-planned journey on the lines joining the points of a pentagon. Their encounters are 'theatrical' and not detached movements. In Quad, a piece for four players, light and percussion, the performers must move to percussive sound while walking along a pre-planned journey on the lines joining the points on a cube. The borderline between music and theatre in this case presents considerable ambiguity, and perhaps this is the point where the two mediums coalesce most closely. Overleaf are some examples from both pieces:
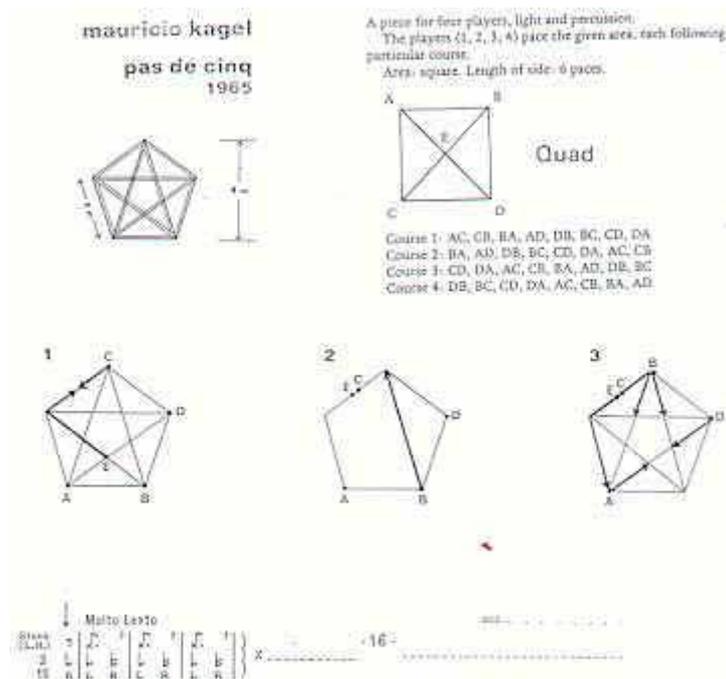
Bertolt Brecht was another outstanding innovator in experimental theatre, who practised and formulated his own theory of the separation of the elements. "Words, music and setting must become more independent of one another. So long as the expression *Gesamtkuntswerk* means that the integration is a muddle, so long as the arts are supposed to be fused together, the various elements will all be equally degraded, and each will act as a mere "feed" to the rest," he wrote in 1930.[21] His belief was that fusion of artistic mediums results in equal degradation rather than elevation. Brecht already had experience of *Die Dreigroschenoper* behind him, notable for its separation of music from all the other elements. The orchestra was placed on stage, and for the singing of songs a special change of lighting was arranged: the orchestra was lit up; the titles of the various numbers were projected on the screens at the back, and the actors changed position before the number began." He was not isolated in his approach, but was part of a far larger movement. There was a definite tendency for the arts and sciences towards analysis and the exhaustive examination of small units. This was the period leading up to the great discoveries of micro-physics and nuclear science, thus the urge to break up entities into their basic elements and reconstitute them in new relationships was mirrored in the arts. Brecht was altering the relationships between these separated elements to create new meanings and associations in the resultant structure with a new emphasis on music. Kagel's interest in exploring the relationships between (incomparison to the fusion between) different mediums is an expression of this, and he was later to make this analysis itself an object of his art. In *Match* the composer does not seek the fusion of film and music in the conventional sense, nor does it aim at their peaceful co-existence which doesn't reflect Kagel's dialectical interest in his mediums. Rather, film and music achieve through rigorous composition a unity whose dialectical nature can only be preserved in their dissociation, which in turn results in a continual tension between them. Kagel's interest in the theatricality of objects is also a demonstration of the detachment he wishes to keep between an object and its function, presenting situations with diverse interpretative possibilities, keeping the audience frustrated as to the purpose of the actions and the objects connected with them. *Repertoire,* a movement taken from his major theatre work *Staatstheater,* presents a hundred brief scenes without text or plot, that involve interactions between objects and people. One of the scenes is simply entitled 'Scratching' (the scenes were given titles merely so as to make rehearsing

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[21] Nouritza Matossian, "the new music theatre," Music and Musicians, (Sept '76).

them easier): an actor comes on stage with a gramaphone record held in front of his face - a sort of mask.  He turns to face the audience, suddenly producing a nail, and viciously scratches the surface of the record.[22]  This could affect the audience by its implication of self-mutilation, or by presumption that he is wilfully destroying a consumer product, or any other possibility.

The last topic to discuss is the nature of Kagel's essential ambiguity: His connection with musical tradition and his dialectical reaction against it.  Kagel's love for music has resulted in quite a few works composed in homage of other composers.  These, however, are not obsequious homages, they are challenging works that present the composers interest in the music and new ways of reinterpreting it in the contemporary world.  *Ludwig Van,* Kagel's surreal film, is of course a homage to Beethoven, although it uses quite revolutionary musical collage techniques.  This homage theme is also present in his piano piece *Ungis incarnatus est* where Kagel projects a fragment of Liszt's Nuages gris into the 20th Century, while in the *Variations without fugue on Brahms' variation and fugue on a theme of Handel*  Brahms' familiar piano variations are paraphrased with a difference: in the middle of the work 'Brahms' emerges from the recesses of the orchestra and reminisces on his life and times in Hamburg.[23]  There are also his works Fürst Igor, Strawinsky  (1982), a homage to Stravinsky, and Mitternachtsstuck (1980/81,85/86) a long theatre piece based on the written recollections of Schumann rather than his music.[24]

His reactions against musical tradition and convention are equally strong, and are particularly apparent in his 'instrumental theatre' works.  In one the movement from *Staatstheater*  called *Ensemble,*  the whole tradition of opera is negated.  This section calls for a 16 voice ensemble representative of every vocal category from coloratura soprano to basso profundo.  Each singer is clad in typical opera costume, yet without any attempt to adapt to the costumes of other performers.  there is no scenery, simply a set of plain screens - representing the alienation of each costume from its 'natural surroundings' (which anyway is totally unnatural).  Furthermore, the singers are also denied the possibility of dramatic movement, since they are confined to their chairs. *Repertoire,* with its absurd representation of apparently inconsequential actions, questions the whole tradition of music-theatre.[25]

Also, in the movement from *Sonant*  called *Piece touchée, piece jouée*  where the performers must practice very difficult music without actually making a sound, shows a reaction against virtuoso performance.  Kagel's works are almost without exception extremely difficult to play, yet on the surface, at least, it gives the player little opportunity to 'shine' in the conventional sense.  Since the concept of the 'virtuoso performer' is another institutional relic of the 19th century conception of music-making, the decrepitude inherent in 'virtuosity' is transferred into the music itself.  the same tendency reaches an extreme in *Con Voce*  for three mute players, who are permitted to bring their normal instruments onstage, but are not allowed to play them.[26]  Kagel dedicated his piece *Zwei-Mann-Orchester*  (two-man orchestra) "to the memory of an institution that is in the process of extinction - the orchestra."[27]  Composed from 1971 until 1973, the work presents instruments assembled out of junk, parts of instruments, old discarded objects of different sorts which combine to create two enormous and complex sound making machines which occupy a large gallery.  Two performers sit in controlling positions at either end and proceed to activate different parts of the instruments with their hands, elbows, knees, in fact every part of the body is

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[22] Richard Toop, "social critic in music," <u>Music and Musicians</u>, (May 1974).

[23] ibid.

[24] Michael Blake, "Kagel at the Almeida," <u>Contact</u>, (No. 33).

[25] Richard Toop, "social critic in music," <u>Music and Musicians</u>, (May 1974).

[26] ibid.

[27] Mauricio Kagel, <u>Zwei-Mann-Orchester (score),</u> Universal Edition 1975.

harnessed into the activity of making sounds. The performers virtually trapped in their seats, were faced with a complex of instruments which they activated from a distance with a series of ropes and pulleys.  These objects possess compelling presences which command the attention of the audience as much as the music.  One of the players attaches a large metal grater to his chest and proceeds to rub a roller studded with large metal pins against it while blowing through a plastic snout to obtain a whistling sound.  The uneasiness increases as the instruments more and more resemble instruments of torture with which the performers struggle to produce sounds from.  The analogy of the performer enslaved to an instrument which makes excessive demands on the body can easily go beyond its musical repercussions.[28]

Mauricio Kagel has presented, and continues to present compositions that seem to come for an inexhaustible spring of ideas, suggesting a phenomenal imaginative power.  This multi-disciplinary  perspective is probably the primary reason he has created such a wide variety of works, including films, plays, and puppet shows[29], and any number of multi-media compositions. It is also true that Kagel has brought into use new means of producing and structuring sounds. Indeed, his work suggests an enlarged understanding of the concept 'music', an understanding which not only covers all sounds, but also phenomena of, motion or visual effect.[30]  The dynamic nature of his compositions and the way he reflects the work of other artists in his own suggests a man with a deep interest  in all arts, and a commitment to a true exploration of his mediums, and although much of his work has a humourous exterior, it is as often as not underlined by a dialectically dark detachment.  From this survey of his work, two broad streams can be distinguished: the hybrid theatrical event; an assemblage or collage of drama, text, movement, plastic, and visual elements to which music belongs not as an added element but as a necessary one.  The attitude to text and language can be redefined in a musical context, involving fragmentation of the words, or texts can be avoided altogether.  Kagel has discussed the importance of the radio-play to the new music-theatre, broadening the scope of using language in music and avoiding conventions of the visual media.[31]  Works of the second stream specifically dramatise and comment upon aspects of musical life, be they concerned with creation, composition, the instrument, performance, gesture and convention, rehearsal and fantasy or any related aspect of the musical performance.  Opera came into its own as a powerful form through the total fusion of its constituent components: now out of their fragmentation and isolation emerge the different organisms of the new music theatre.[32]

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[28] Nouritza Matossian, "the new music theatre," Music and Musicians, (May 1974).

[29] *Bestiarium*  (1974) is a composition for two puppeteers who are deploying partially deflated inflatable toys!

[30] Stanley Sadie ed., "Mauricio Kagel," The New Grove Dictionary of Music, Macmillan Publishers 1980.

[31] Mauricio Kagel, "on the artist's self understanding and tasks," New Music Articles 1, (1982).

[32] Nouritza Matossian, "the new music theatre," Music and Musicians, (Sept. '76).

# GRAPHICS :

1  Mauricio Kagel, *Phonophonie, vier Melodramen für zwei Stimmen und andere Schallquellen*  (score).
1963/64 Universal Edition.

2  Mauricio Kagel, *Anagrama-1* (score).
1965 Universal Edition.

3  Mauricio Kagel, *Antithese, piece for one performer with electronic and public sounds*  (score)  1962 Henry Litoff's Verlag/C.F. Peters

4 Richard Toop, "social critic in music," Music and Musicians, (May '74).

5  Mauricio Kagel, *Sur Scene*  (score).
Page of score taken from Reginald Smith Brindle's
The New Music, second edition 1987, Oxford University
Press.

4  Mauricio Kagel, *Pas de Cinq*  (score).
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 Samuel Beckett, *Quad*  (play)
Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett, Faber and Faber
Ltd, 1984.

5 Mauricio Kagel, *Repertoire*  from *Staatstheater* (score)
1971 Universal Edition.