Mauricio Kagel's *Staatstheater*
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Of all the major European composers active in the 1960's and 70's, Mauricio Kagel was perhaps the one whose work most fundamentally engaged the theatrical. Beginning with *Sonant* (1960), Kagel coined the term "Instrumental Theatre" to describe his unique brand of musical theatre. Instrumental Theatre "acknowledges the physical presence of the performers and requires them to perform sound with a presentational dramatic meaning. Performers comment (either verbally or in mime) on their playing and that of others, or create sounds in dramatic contexts, pointing to various aspects of difficulty, mockery, or confusion."[1] Unlike the works in the tradition of dramatic, narrative-based music theatre, Instrumental Theater does not attempt to combine music and theater so that they form a richer synthetic whole. Rather, it is an attempt to designate actions which generate simultaneous musical and theatrical significance.

In musical performances, the spatial arrangement of performers and the physical gestures used in the production of sound invariably carry a latent theatrical import. Likewise, the recitation of lines and the movements on stage in the theater can contain various musical potentialities. In order to neutralize this potentially destabilizing multivalence, traditional musical theater tries to hide or minimize it. For example, the orchestra is usually hidden in a pit so that its gestures do not distract from the "proper" dramatic actions on stage. Even when instrumental

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[1] Attinello, Paul. "Kagel, Mauricio." In *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.turing.library.northwestern.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/14594 (accessed March 17, 2011).

ensembles are featured onstage (the marching band in *Wozzeck*, for example), they are used to represent musicians in the dramatic narrative. There is no attempt to situate their actions in a broader field of gestural significance.

The innovations of Instrumental Theatre were symptomatic of a broader paradigm shift in the theatre of the late 20th century. Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* details many of the defining characteristics of this new type of theater. Just as Lehmann describes, Instrumental Theatre does not function through mimetic representation, as the theater of the past had, it is not determined through the "imagination of a comprehensible narrative and/or mental *totality*"[2], and it does not try to hold up the wholeness of its form as "the model of the real."[3] It has more affinity with what Jean-François Lyotard called "energetic theatre", in which meaning is abandoned in favor of the presentation of "forces, intensities, present affects."[4] In fact, music provides a felicitous point of entry into the world of energetic theatre: performing music already presupposes embodiment (as opposed to the emphasis on words in dramatic theatre), people are generally more accustomed to encountering musical sound non-representationally than they are physical action, and sound itself is defined largely by its intensive properties (pitch, amplitude). Instrumental Theatre also has resonances with the "theatre of props" of Jürgen Kruse, where "the stage is transformed into a playing field or rubbish tip littered with objects, inscriptions and signs"[5]. Such a description could very well apply to Kagel's *Acustica* or *Zwei-Mann-Orchester*, in which the various sound-

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[2] Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Routledge (2006): Page 21.
[3] Lehmann: Page 22.
[4] Lyotard, Jean-François. Quoted in Lehmann: Page 37.
[5] Lehmann: Page 91.

producing objects are cluttered across the stage. Indeed, Kagel himself described the instruments in his pieces as "sounding props"[6] and used the word "instrumente" to suggest the dual meaning of musical instrument/tool.

One of the major examples of Instrumental Theater is the "opera" *Staatstheater* (1970). Kagel described the work as "not just the negation of opera, but of the whole tradition of music theatre."[7] In it, he uses the entire mechanism of the opera house (soloists, chorus, orchestra, etc.) to effect a grand parody of the institution of opera itself. The specialization and hierarchization of the performing forces is turned on its end: soloists sing in ensembles, chorus members sing solos, and non-dancers perform the balletic interlude, "Kontra→Danse". Sexually suggestive, absurd, and grotesque actions mock the proprieties of the opera-going public while an intentional roughness and awkwardness of performance pokes fun at the deftness and professionalism demanded by bourgeois dilettantism. I will focus on the first of *Staatstheater*'s nine sections, "Repertoire: Szenisches Konzertstück."

"Repertoire" pulls off the most thorough negation of the opera house's forces: it eschews them. The score consists of one hundred separate actions, a selection of which can be performed in any order by musicians or non-musicians. A few of these actions call for pre-existing instruments (albeit used in non-traditional ways): for example, the trombone in "Zug um Zug" (page 93), the toy piano in "Umzug" (page 94), and the tambourine in "Pas de Can" (page 24). However, most of the actions

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[6] Kölnischer Kunstverein. *Mauricio Kagel: Theatrum Instrumentorum*. Köln: Der Verein (1975). Page 5. Translation Mine.
[7] Attinello.

specify the construction of a completely novel sound-producing mechanism. Among the materials used to construct these mechanisms are a styrofoam ball, sheets of brass, a phonograph record, and a baby's pacifier. By disconnecting the performance of this section from specialized instrumental and vocal techniques, Kagel alienates the space of the opera stage, which is usually circumscribed by the requirements of a professional/expert apparatus of musical production. His non-idiomatic use of instruments and the creation of novel instruments also serves to alienate the sound world of the opera from that which has been bequeathed by tradition, with all its concomitant baggage.

The actions that make up "Repertoire" have a much more complex relationship to pre-existing notational systems and techniques than simple negation. Technique develops as a way to standardize the production of sound: performative actions are reduced to reproducible identities, repeatable tasks. The evolution of technique has been symbiotic with the evolution of notation. Notation is a symbolic encoding of techniques (with inevitable feedback): it reflects the invested values of established technique and common praxis. In traditional western notation, such values include regularity of pitch, rationality of rhythm, and the segmentation of musical events into whole, closed, discreet units (indicated through the coordination of independent variables).

Western notation is at its root descriptive. It indicates a desired result, not the means of achieving it. The alternative is prescriptive notation, in which the converse is true. In the former, freedom is built in to the execution of the action,

while in the latter, freedom is built in to sonic result. Each of the actions in "Repertoire" is designated by four separate elements:

- music notation (symbolic, descriptive)
- textual instructions (symbolic, prescriptive)
- graphic representation (image, descriptive)
- epigram

Through the coordination of these qualitatively different types of notation, a complex interplay of determinacy and indeterminacy is achieved in each action. On one extreme is the utterly precise periodicity of the heartbeats in "Mea Culpa" (page 29) while on the other is the open-ended instruction to insert a "folklike melody fragment" in "Armgeige" (page 11). By building indeterminacy into the actions themselves, Kagel ensures that their execution will have a performative spontaneity. This spontaneity contributes to the immediacy of the gesture, the feeling of presence instead of representation. The use of non-conventional means of notating music (like the graphic representations or textual instructions) or the undermining of traditional notation from within allows Kagel to question or overturn those values implicit in our notation itself.

The text provided for each action consists almost entirely of simple, practical instructions for its execution. No mention is made of non-musical referents or symbolisms. The only place that such a reference is made is in the epigram, which is present in the score but at no time visible to the audience. The epigram is a word or short phrase that hints at the symbolic resonances of the action. Some examples are: "Unfall" ("accident"), "Russisches Roulett" ("Russian Roulette"), and

"Enthaltsamkeit" ("abstinence"). This raises the question of how representation or symbolism can work in a piece that eschews language, mimetic action, and narrative. The fact that each action bears an epigram combined with Kagel's suggestions regarding the combination of actions indicate that he was motivated by (or at least cognizant of) their possible extra-musical connotations. Lehmann refers to the construction of meaning in similar theatrical contexts: "instead of contiguity…one finds disparate heterogeneity, in which any one detail seems to be able to take the place of any other. As in surrealist writing games this circumstance continually leads to the intensified perception of the individual phenomenon and simultaneously to the discovery of surprising *correspondances*."[8] Whereas traditional dramatic theatre produces a communal experience of catharsis, the personal struggle with a plethora of signs leads to a private, individual reading.

Meaningful connections in "Repertoire" are not linear, hierarchical, or predetermined. As with Lehmann's idea of "parataxis", a profusion of signs with no facile interconnectedness forces the theatre-goer to forge their own metaphors and relationships. Given that the ordering and combination of actions in "Repertoire" is indeterminate in the text, this process happens twice: first when the production team fixes an order for performance and again when the audience experiences that performance. In a traditional opera text, the order of scenes and the music are fixed. The act of producing such an opera consists in faithfully realizing the music and the dramatic instructions while developing a suitable staging (including costumes, sets, and actions). With "Repertoire", the set consists of a series of blank

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[8] Lehmann: Page 84.

screens and the performers' movements on stage are determined in each individual action. In this case, the job of the production team is much different. It demands the courage of a creative artist combined with the scrupulous sensitivity of an interpreter. Every opera production is to some extent a remaking or reproduction of an originary text. With *Staatstheater*, that remaking is more profound. The variety and dynamism built in to the text contain endless possibilities for novel interpretations, making the fact that the piece has only been performed a handful of times particularly disappointing.

In order to move away from generalities, I will examine a few specific actions for their symbolic resonance and their relationship to the aesthetic apparatus of opera. **"Mea Culpa"** (page 29) instructs the performer to walk on stage holding a bass drum foot-pedal. He uses the foot-pedal to beat his chest, where a metal plate has been hidden, with a regular pulse. The chest beating with the foot-pedal ceases and the performer begins to beat his chest with his fist. Finally, the foot-pedal beating comes back, but slower. This action suggests heartbeats and the act of self-flagellation (as suggested by the epigram). It also refers to the histrionic chest-beating of actors or opera singers – mocking their self-indulgent performances.

"Akkord" (page 66) has the performer attach rough surfaces (such as sandpaper or metal mesh) to his clothes. He sits on a short three-legged stool (sunglasses optional) and rubs a striated plastic pipe rapidly back and forth against the rough surfaces on his body, creating a scraping sound. As indicated by the epigram ("Akkord" means piece-rate work), the materials used along with the performer's posture and actions suggest manual labor.

"Zug um Zug" (page 93) directs the performer to dress in a jacket with tails. His bare left foot is inserted in the crook of the trombone's slide in such a way that as he walks across the stage while blowing into the trombone, the slide moves in and out, altering the pitch. The fingers of the performer's left hand, which rests on the slide's crossbar hold a double-reed "like a cigarette." Especially considering that the performer will most likely not be a trained trombonist, the sounds produced by this action will be sloppy and crude. The jacket with tails is making an obvious reference to the orchestral musician's concert dress, but the image is made grotesque by the absurd redistribution of the instrument's parts in relation to the body of the performer. The gaucheness of the instrumental techniques indicated and the gesture's vulgar sonic result parody the seriousness and professionalism of the classical music establishment – while the action itself is a great instance of pure physical comedy. This action is also an example of the unity of musical and theatrical gesture that defines the genre of Instrumental Theatre: the changes in pitch caused by the motion of the slide are inseparable from the action of walking.

"Unfall" (page 10) has an offstage performer dump several brass plates into a metal container to make a loud metallic crash. This action takes place entirely behind the scenes, but even without the visual component it retains some theatrical significance. Kagel indicates that this action should interrupt some other action already taking place on stage. The sound of loud crashing metal and the epigram itself ("accident") makes one think of a car crash or another accidental occurrence. The acceptance of accidental events (even if they are simulated accidents) into the

fabric of an opera is a significant departure from traditional operatic performances, where complete control is the ideal.

Although the appraisal of Kagel's work will always be colored by his bizarre sense of humor and reputation as a clown, the ideas at work in Instrumental Theatre were among the most profound and revolutionary of his era. While some of the parody in *Staatstheater* might seem a little stale forty years later, many of its deeper critiques of the traditions and practices of musical theatre are still relevant today.