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Kagel at the Almeida

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It has been said of Kagel that his ideas are often much better than his music. More often than not this has been said by those who have heard very little of the music, and certainly nothing of his recent output. Kagel's work has always been little known in this country and recordings virtually ceased to appear after about 1970.

The 1988 Almeida Festival has changed all that, with the mounting of a retrospective covering thirty years, from 1957 (soon after Kagel's arrival in Europe from Argentina) to 1987. Over the space of four days, eighteen pieces were performed by both local and visiting artists, and the film *Ludwig Van* was shown. This had been complemented over the previous three weeks by the showing of seven of Kagel's other films on Channel 4. The first two days concentrated on works involving text and/or film, and the first day (held at the South Bank) included three music theatre pieces. The third and fourth concerts were devoted to chamber music: his string quartets and works for various permutations of the piano trio medium.

I think it can safely be said that Kagel (and not Peter Maxwell Davies or anyone else) has defined the medium of new music theatre and instrumental theatre. No other composer has examined and continually developed the medium as thoroughly as Kagel has, from his earliest works in the fifties, through *Staatstheater* (1967-69), his major examination of the conventions and resources of the opera house, to some of his finest works such as *Kantrimiusik* and *Mare Nostrum*, written in the seventies. Only recently does there seem to be a tendency towards writing 'absolute' music (the Third String Quartet of 1986-87 for example). It was a pity that the retrospective did not

include a work such as *Kantrimiusik*, as this is not only a very fine musical score, but a wonderful piece of music theatre – if sensitively and tastefully done.

I'm afraid that this wasn't the case in Vocem's staged performances of *Ensemble* and *Hallelujah*, given on the first day. Kagel is a very sensitive and subtle composer, and these same qualities, together with absolute precision, are crucial to the performance of his music. Firmer direction was definitely needed here. *Hallelujah* (1967-68) allows the performers considerable freedom as regards both musical material and theatrical presentation. The work can last from 15 to 45 minutes, be performed by 16-32 voices or only three solo voices, and done in a conventional concert arrangement or in a mixed concert and music theatre format. Kagel suggests that the actions may be derived from the field of ritual and liturgy. Vocem's performance lasted for just over half an hour, and was given by seven singers dressed in white habits, one of whom took on the role of leader/conductor. Some of Kagel's suggestions regarding staging were followed: five of the singers emerged from different parts of the auditorium and departed the same way; but the piece began with two of the singers on stage, one seated at a dummy organ console performing wildly in mime. Throughout the piece one had the feeling that Ken Russell had been directing this rather tasteless performance of *Hallelujah*, which was quite simply way over the top.

Ensemble (1967-9), one of the sections of the nine-part work *Staatstheater* is scored for sixteen voices, but in this eight-voice version each singer took more than one part. Each singer represents a well-known character from the operatic literature, and Kagel suggests that they be costumed accordingly. In Vocem's version they were not, so one could not identify characters easily, and the chosen setting was the dressing room of an opera house with the singers warming up before a performance, with the addition of a stage hand sweeping, his broom eventually taken into service as a prop by one of the singers. The composer's idea in *Ensemble* was to 'illuminate what is frequently the void between the intentional expression of the music and the gestures chosen to convey it'. The singers should have been confined to chairs, as the score suggests, to limit their dramatic movement. But for all this, the performance was not without its humorous moments.

Anagrama, the programme given by the New London Chamber Choir and Ensemble under James Wood demonstrated rather neatly three of Kagel's approaches to text-setting which the composer had also talked about in a pre-concert interview. The first of these was also the earliest of Kagel's works to be performed in the festival, *Anagrama* (1957-8) for four solo voices, speaking chorus and ensemble. The exact function of the four (seated) soloists was not really clear, as most of the text was declaimed *and* sung by the 'speaking' chorus, with occasional contributions from the soloists. This was pure fifties serialism, something Kagel moved away from fairly quickly, but nevertheless an enjoyable piece, (which is more than can be said about so many compositions from this period). The text 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'.

The second approach to text-setting came in the form of *Fürst Igor, Strawinsky* (1982) for bass voice and ensemble. This is in many ways a straightforward setting of a text: Igor's aria from Act 2 of Borodin's *Prince Igor*. Kagel's wonderful use of instrumental colour is manifest in his deployment of the very small but characteristic ensemble, particularly the presence of the tuba (almost obligatory in his music from *Kantrimiusik* onwards) and the unusual diversity of the percussion. This is a homage to Stravinsky, through a setting of a text whose ambiguity reminded the composer of Stravinsky. As he says, 'Many of these words could have been spoken by Stravinsky', for example, 'Now I often see corpses in the dark night / They accuse me! You sacrificed us! / My fame and honour are disgraced, / The distant "homeland" curses me. Woe!'. This mood is expressed in the instrumentation too: bass voice, low instruments with dark colours (cor anglais, french horn, tuba, viola) and percussion instruments symbolising death, imprisonment, etc. (anvil, iron chains, wood pieces, heavy wooden block, metal pail with heavy stones – all played by an unseen percussionist) and instruments with a liturgical association (the deep bell producing a 'plaintive and mysterious sound', the semanterion – a resonant board struck with a wooden mallet, used by the Greek-orthodox church as a primitive bell). *Fürst Igor, Strawinsky* was exquisitely sung by the American bass Nicholas Isherwood.

Another recent piece *Mitternachtsstük* (1980-81, 85-86) for chorus and instruments, represents a third approach to text-setting. The text is taken from Robert Schumann's *Diaries of 1827-1836* (published in Leipzig only in 1971). The contents of these diaries sound absolutely fascinating (what a pity they are not available in an English translation!): Schumann's thoughts on music, poetry, economics, politics, social life, etc. So Kagel's piece is about the writer Schumann, rather than the composer. The choir acts as narrator, 'who sympathises with, but retains a distance from the characters' – Selene, Gustav/Skeleton, the Prince, and two unnamed characters – sung by five soloists. What caused confusion was the constant reference in Kagel's programme note to three movements, which were followed in this performance by a fourth, the latter almost as long as the first three put together. This presumably is the movement written in 1985-86, while the others date from several years earlier. As it happens the last movement also turned out to be the most beautiful, accompanied by a fantastic combination of violin and harmonium, which both enhanced the cathedral setting of this scene (entitled *Altarblatt* (Altar Sheet/Piece)) and the wordsetting of the text itself. Lines such as 'chords, like tears from gentle wistfulness; hovering and gliding they floated by like gentle rays of light' or 'Now new sounds joined in . . . now it was as if a single broken note was speaking slumberously' are beautifully painted in musical terms, and even the more obvious depiction of lines such as 'Silence – then a single deep note hardly audible . . . fills the nave' or 'one more dissonant chord and then no more' seem fresh in the context of Kagel's setting. The writing for violin and harmonium is particularly well displayed in a purely instrumental prelude and an interlude. The work as a whole, however, felt somewhat overlong, as did a number of pieces in other concerts; but the setting of the texts, the deployment of the chorus, the exploration of unusual vocal effects, the use of the soloists, and the choice of instrumentation – a different combination for each movement – was always fascinating and often produced breathtaking effects.

The concert had opened with Kagel's instrumental realisation of two ballades by Guilllaume de Machaut. Although Kagel does not indicate tempi, the pieces were taken at a deadly pace, and not even Kagel's sensitive orchestration could save these from sounding like the very worst excesses of early music performance in the bad old days. Also on the subject of performance, while one acknowledges the New London Chamber Choir's commitment to new music, their more amateur approach to performance was very apparent when contrasted with Nicholas Isherwood's moving account of *Fürst Igor, Strawinsky.*

Two other works involved the setting of texts: *Tango Alemán*, performed at the final concert, and *Oral Treason*, a 75-minute music epic about the Devil, given its UK première at the QEH. This choice of venue made one wish that the whole Almeida Festival could be moved there: comfortable seating, air conditioning and uncramped restaurant facilities. The one thing that remained unchanged was the late starting time of each event. *Oral Treason* (1981-83) turned out to be a fascinating sequence of texts interwoven to form the epic, and accompanied by what is often a very good musical score consisting of 36 numbers. The text, in an English translation by Christopher Logue, was spoken by three actors – the marvellous Eleanor Bron, and the rather less marvellous Geoffrey Chater and Karl Johnson. The design for this somewhat tacky production, directed by Pierre Audi, consisted of three suspended corpses which seemed to have little significance, dwarfed as they were by the size of the QEH stage. Eleanor Bron shone, moving through an incredible range of moods and characters in this considerable *tour de force*. The ensemble playing of the Almeida Ensemble (which like the New London Ensemble the following night, is an *ad hoc* band, and consists of anyone who is free in June), despite the presence of a conductor (Rupert Bawden) was often ragged but the tuba player (Joseph Hassan), cimbalom player (Gregory Knowles) and percussionists (Terence Emery and Keith Bartlett) were outstanding. Once again Kagel's wonderful sense of colour and sympathy for the instruments was in evidence. His use of the cimbalom was particularly striking, and the violin often recalled the same instrument (and the Devil!) in Stravinsky's *Histoire du Soldat*. In many ways the BBC television presentation a week later was much stronger: the individual speakers were focussed, the ensemble were always headless and the cutting was quite imaginative. But the problem of the work's length, which I had felt at the first performance, remained.

Three nights later, in the programme entitled *Finale*, we heard what might be called *Reminiscences de Oral Treason*, or rather the Piano Trio (1984-85). This important 25-minute contribution to the fairly scanty twentieth-century piano trio repertoire made one of the deepest impressions of the entire Kagel retrospective.

Cast in three movements, and using material from *Oral Treason* (mainly the best bits), Kagel seems to have achieved what he did not often achieve elsewhere: by compressing the material into three succinct movements and scoring it for a familiar and intimate medium, the work never loses pace – indeed, it is action-packed! And it is superbly conceived for the medium. Looking at it a little more closely, it becomes apparent that Kagel has arranged the numbers of *Oral Treason* into three movements in such a way as to give the impression of a conventional piano trio, in a broad sense not unlike the Charles Ives Piano Trio (the soundworld of the Ives is sometimes not all that far away either, just as in *Klangwölfe*). The first movement, the shortest of the three, is essentially a slow movement, consisting of a sequence of four numbers plus a short coda – using an E minor triad – which recurs later. The second movement is the 'scherzo', with a slower, quieter 'trio', and an extended 'scherzo' repeat. The final movement, essentially quick, but with a slow introduction (underlaid with the E minor triad passage), is characterised by its central waltz leading to a strong climax, and followed by a final distillation in the same coda material as the first movement. But I suppose what really made this finale to the retrospective so convincing was the performance. Three great musicians (the violinist Saschko Gawriloff, the cellist Siegfried Palm and the pianist Bruno Canino) playing as if they'd lived with the work for years (not just two!). And this was undoubtedly the best Kagel performance of the festival. It prompts speculation as to the performances we would get if other great artists took Kagel's works into their repertoires – the Vermeer Quartet, the Alban Berg Quartet, the Beaux Arts Trio, *et al.*

The other works were performed with the same care and precision: *Klangwölfe* (1978) for violin and piano, *An tasten* (1978) for piano, *Siegfried/p* for solo cello (1972) and the humorous and charming *Tango Alemán* (1978) for voice, violin, piano and bandoneon. Kagel was himself the speaker of the made-up language in this piece – meant to sound like German to the Argentinians, and like Argentinian to the Germans. Kagel's intention was to recreate the 'essence' of the tango by using typical melodic and rhythmic structures, but presented in a somewhat fragmented form. The singer narrates a 'sentimental' tale – Kagel reminds us that the singer is, as is customary, a bard singing of shattered hopes, remembering great longings, always anticipating tragic love.

The other three instrumental works are small-scale pieces: *Klangwölfe*, with its references to Bartók, Ives, Berg and Ravel is quite beautiful in places when played without the wretched Tonwolf mute required by the composer (I know from having rehearsed it in that way myself). Saschko Gawriloff, nevertheless, delivered the piece with breathtaking poise, and Bruno Canino was ultra-sensitive in balancing the Steinway concert grand with the practice-muted violin. Canino's solo, *An tasten* (which actually received its UK première about ten years ago, and not at this concert!) is not an étude in the traditional sense. What we have for the most part is a 17-minute sequence of Alberti-basses, but played by both hands, so that melody and accompaniment have, as Kagel puts it, become inseparable. As in *Klangwölfe* there are references to music of the past, in this case piano music, both specific (the *Moonlight* Sonata, the opening motif of Schoenberg's op.11) and general (Debussy, and Bartók again). Originally written for the remarkable Aloys Kontarsky (like most of Kagel's piano works until a few years ago), Bruno Canino made this piece very much his own, poised over the piano like a bird of prey, playing cleanly and incisively – something which I valued in his playing of all the works in the programme, and something that I missed as an essential elsewhere in the Kagel concerts. Siegfried Palm, meanwhile, almost stole the show with his tailor-made solo, *Siefried/p*. The difficulties of playing this work (and singing and grunting – inspired by Palm's vocalising when he plays) can perhaps only be

appreciated by cellists, in particular the table of fingering the five pitches (taken from Palm's name) as harmonics, in 75 different ways – which Kagel calls his contribution to an anti-spectacular virtuoso style. The results are pretty spectacular nevertheless.

I have left until last what was probably the least interesting concert as a whole – that by the Arditti Quartet. This was not so much their fault, rather the fact that Kagel has not produced a particularly strong corpus of music for string quartet. The First/Second String Quartet of 1965-7, two movements which can be performed in any order and can be separated, turned out to be rather silly 'squeaky gate' stuff from the sixties. However, the music-theatre element did rescue me from total boredom. The players gave a reasonably unembarassing presentation of the theatrical dimension (I understand that the composer had worked with them for a good many hours on the piece), but one couldn't help feeling that this work would have been better left out of the festival, particularly as there are better Kagel works than this from the sixties. The range of special effects yielded some unusual sounds, which created an element of anticipation for the listener – sellotape on the strings, knitting needles, and a bit of wood replacing the bow were among the best, although the leader's donning of a leather glove on his left hand was the highlight here. According to the composer these effects are all used 'to realise a prefabricated prepared poetry'.

The two movements were separated by a trifle for piccolo and string quartet dating from 1985 and called *Pan*. Based on the ascending five-note figure from *The Magic Flute*, this four-minute piece made no impression, despite an extensive programme note by the composer extolling the 'magic' of Mozart's opera. The most recent work of Kagel's to be heard in the festival – it had only been premièred the week before – was the Third String Quartet (1986/87), and this was also one of the great disappointments. Kagel took on the challenge of writing for that most challenging of media, and he took it on with a vengeance too, producing a 45-minute work. Fairly arbitrarily cast in four movements, for he seemed to have composed short musical 'numbers' here (as in *Oral Treason*, and other recent large-scale pieces), he uses many of the clichés of string quartet writing in his investigation of the medium, along with what sounded like his by now customary allusions to or quotations of other music (I thought I heard Prokofiev in the fourth movement). There were nice moments, in what seemed like a good performance of the piece, but, at three quarters of an hour, once again, it came out as far too long. Kagel seems to have hit a twofold problem with this work: purely the composition of a piece of 'absolute' music, plus his tendency towards stretching pieces out to a quite unnecessary length. The Piano Trio at half the length more than made up for it, and that is the work that I shall want to hear some more.

Three pieces remain: *Eight Short Pieces for the Organ* from the radio fantasy *Rrrrrrr . . . .*, marvellously played by Christopher Bowers-Broadbent, who obtained wonderful colours from the instrument and imbued each of the pieces with just the right character; and the two works involving film. Kagel's recent score for Buñuel's surrealist masterpiece from 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. Perhaps this will become the standard (or at least optional) soundtrack for this film now. His 100-minute film tribute to Beethoven, *Ludwig Van* is rather showing signs of its age, and seeing Kagel's recent films one is aware how much he has developed as a filmmaker. Following Ludwig Van, a cameraman, around the city of Bonn and joining a group of tourists who are taking the Beethoven tour to the Beethoven House, is a fascinating experience. Less so is the very serious roundtable discussion by a panel of musicologists and Kagel himself. However, the realisation of the musical score, from the works of Beethoven, remains a landmark in the area of collage pieces.

Looking over the Almeida Festival as a whole, my strongest feeling is that had it not been for the Kagel retrospective (entitled *Ode to Cologne*, one of those dreadful titles that only the Almeida could come up with) the entire festival might have passed unnoticed this year. I still feel that more imaginatively planned, it could have given a far greater overview of Kagel's best work. There have been several far more interesting festivals in past years, even given the Almeida management's tendency towards overkill and often less than ideal artistic standards. Unfortunately what will probably happen now is that the music of Kagel will not retain its current high profile, and we will see a return to the days of the occasional performances that we had before. It seems that most of this country's ensembles do not play Kagel as a rule. Imagine the wide currency that groups like the London Sinfonietta or the Nash Ensemble could give to pieces like *Kantrimiusik, Mare Nostrum, Fürst Igor, Strawinsky, Mitternachtsstük* and the Piano Trio, while giving middle-of-the-road British music a wee rest. Imagine *Staatstheater* at the Coliseum!