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Writing on Living Composers and the Problem of Advocacy: Failure and the Experimental Work of Mauricio Kagel¹

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To be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it
desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living.
Samuel Beckett (1984, 145)

Scholarship on new music typically suffers from a lack of critical perspective. PhD theses are written, articles and books published and whole careers made on the basis of work that does little more than trace the stated intentions of the composer in their work. The process could be described as bargain basement hermeneutics: study the composer's supposed influences, his or her own pronouncements and look at the work with these things in mind – something will no doubt be found. As a result, the scholar becomes the composer's spokesperson, dutifully explaining how the maestro (maestras remain conspicuously rare in this field) would want his work to be understood – which, evidently, is the only way of correctly interpreting it.

There are many reasons for the predominance of this approach. New music scholars are often dependent on the goodwill of their subjects: one critical remark and you may find yourself frozen out from access to the person, their work and other materials, and from speaking and writing engagements; there are (in)famous examples. Furthermore, the new music business is a tight network in which composers, musicians, institutions, broadcasters, publishers, record companies, agents, journalists and scholars cooperate in often murky ways.

¹ This chapter is based on a keynote lecture, titled 'Un pezzo ... di una grandissima serietà e con una grandissima emozione ... e con elementi totalmente bruti': aesthetic and socio-political considerations and the failure of their integration in Mauricio Kagel's work post-1968', delivered at the conference 'Mauricio Kagel: la musique absolue avec la scène', Université de Nice, April 2014. Some sections may be reprinted in French translation in the conference proceedings.

There is a fine line between scholarship and PR, and some so-called journals are more akin to trade magazines. Finally, the tried-and-tested method delivers results with ease: it is relatively simple to fill any space needed with material that will appear informative and well-founded; no-one is likely to complain. Viewed more charitably, many composers are extremely knowledgeable, articulate and charismatic. They often offer striking insights into their own work and are able to relate it to their inspirations, influences and wider concerns. Who are we to disagree? On the other hand, if composers really are their own best spokespersons and interpreters, what are scholars for? Clearly, their value for public discourse on music depends on their critical independence.

Charles Wilson has analysed the dependence of scholars on the pronouncements of their subjects in the literature on Ligeti. Specifically, he has pointed to Ligeti's 'rhetoric of autonomy', by means of which the composer sought to overstate his artistic independence, as a way of positioning himself in the compositional marketplace. As he has argued further:

Composers' self-representations often serve a function that is as much performative as constative. They are 'position takings', to use Bourdieu's expression, and their assimilation by scholars as straightforward claims to truth often bespeaks a fundamental category mistake. [...]

[I]n a cultural sphere increasingly subject to direct commercial pressures, the image of the 'artist as individual' becomes a valuable promotional tool to that market, co-optable by the very forces it once set out to resist. (2004, 6)

He quotes numerous cases in which Ligeti's exegetes dutifully adopted the composer's own terms, criteria and outlook, so that their commentaries are little more than summaries of the composer's own pronouncements. Ligeti's is hardly a special case. Jonathan Cross has named further examples, including Igor Stravinsky (with Robert Craft acting variously as his faithful interlocutor, biographer, ventriloquist or dummy), Benjamin Britten, Dmitri Shostakovich, Harrison Birtwistle, Pierre Boulez and Michael Finnissy, in which the composer's biography or their own explanations have unduly affected critical reception. For Cross, this fascination with composers' biographies is on a par with celebrity culture (2004, 33). At the same time, he argues that '[w]hether we like it or not, we continue to live with the Romantic legacy of the artist as a free, independent, creative, expressive subject who somehow embodies himself [sic] in his art' (2004, 4). The link he establishes between Romantic conceptions of artistic subjectivity and modern celebrity culture would require further scrutiny: it rings true for some Romantic artists – Lord Byron comes to mind – more than for others, and it is in danger

of conflating different ideas surrounding the expression, performance and projection of the self and their reception by audiences.

Elsewhere I have added case studies on Brian Ferneyhough, Kaija Saariaho, and Helmut Lachenmann to the growing list of contemporary composers whose work tends to be primarily discussed in the terms established by their own ‘position takings’ (to quote Wilson’s mobilisation of Bourdieu; Heile 2017). For present purposes, however, I want to return to my beginnings and my monograph *The Music of Mauricio Kagel* (Heile 2006). The reason is a challenge brought by Nicholas Cook (2003, 255), who has singled out both new music and biographies as two fields in which advocacy is particularly prominent:

There are advocates for individual composers and performers; you can tell that the genre of biography is defined by advocacy, because negative biographies—biographies that attack their subjects—appear anomalous and in some way scandalous in relation to the positive norm. [...] Writers on contemporary ‘art’ music—what they often call ‘new music’—generally act as apologists [...].

My own work falls at the very intersection of the two tendencies that Cook decried. Although my book is not a biography in a strict sense but focuses on Kagel’s creative output, it is questionable whether that makes much of a difference and whether Cook really was referring specifically to narrative accounts of composers’ or performers’ lives, rather than, as is often the case, to studies of their work. To make matters worse, I am guilty of using the term ‘new music’ instead of ‘contemporary “art” music’ in this chapter and elsewhere; indeed, I have edited a book with that term in its title, in which I have specifically defended its use (Heile 2009, 6–7). There is no reason to return to this discussion here, but Cook’s confidence that his own term is ‘correct’ and presumably neutral seems surprising, considering that period or style labels are rarely unproblematic or objective (and why would anyone insist on a term that requires permanent scare quotes?).²

Quibbles over terminology aside, however, I firmly agree with Cook about the problem of critical bias and lack of independence, and I also concur that it tends to be most pronounced in the two fields he has singled out—to say nothing of their combination. When I worked on *The Music of Mauricio Kagel* I was quite aware of the problem—or rather, I became increasingly aware of it while I was writing. In an introduction, I reflected on the problematic

² On the problem of the term ‘contemporary’, see also Collins 2019 and Wilson 2019.

nature of a composer monograph in an age of ‘decentred subjectivity’, not to mention the infamous ‘death of the author’:³

[...] what relevance does its authorship have for the understanding of a work, or, to employ less emphatic language, a creative act? Why does it matter that pieces x and y have been produced by z? In an age that has justly become suspicious of the idea of authorship as creation *ex nihilo* by a God-like genius, why write a composer monograph at all, with all the sub-Carlylean hero worship which seems to be inextricably bound up with the genre? (Heile 2006, 1)

That I answered my own questions affirmatively obviously did little to lay the problem to rest. Although I sought to avoid critical dependence, I am not sure that I always succeeded. I have to confess that while I was writing *The Music of Mauricio Kagel*, the thought that Kagel would read the book crossed my mind more than once, and I had already found out how touchy he could be (to my great relief he gave it his approval). I would like to say that I remained steadfast, but I could be deluding myself.

Failure in the Work of Mauricio Kagel

With that in mind, I want to discuss instances in which Kagel failed. It seems clear to me that Kagel experienced failure with much of his experimental work from the late 1960s and early ‘70s. It is no good in this context to admire his intentions, which is what has generally happened in the Kagel literature (cf. Schnebel 1970; Klüppelholz 1981, 1991); what is more important is to take a close look at the outcomes and their reception. At the same time, failure is of course a central theme in Kagel’s own work from this very period. Indeed, Kagel seems to have systematically studied different kinds of failure. First, there are the often farcical failures of communication in *Match* for Three Players (1964), the Second String Quartet (1967-74) and *Hallelujah* for Voices (1968), in which the musicians constantly misread one another’s signals and intentions. Second, there is individual failure in pieces such as *Phonophonie: Four Melodramas for Two Voices and Other Sound Sources* (1965) or *Atem* for One Wind Player (1970), which both feature ageing performers long past their prime who have visible and audible difficulties mastering the challenges posed by the pieces. The third category is technological failure, as, for instance, in *Antithese: Play for One Actor with*

³ Barthes’s (1977) essay is one of a series – by Barthes himself and others, including Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida – to radically critique traditional notions of authorship. Its provocative title has guaranteed it an arguably outsized impact and an often superficial response that fails to do justice to his subtler arguments. This is not the place for an extended discussion of ideas of authorship, but see, for example, Burke 2008; Bennett 2005.

Electronic and Public Sounds (1962) and *Zwei-Mann-Orchester for Two One-Man Orchestras* (1973), which involve piles of obsolete instruments and machines from a scrapyard. Finally, in Kagel's pieces for experimental sound-producers, which represent the majority of his output at the time, failure becomes a central category: not only do the sound sources not reliably produce effective sounds, but their players have also, by necessity, not fully learned how to control them.

A particularly striking example is *Exotica for Extra-European Instruments* (1972), which performs failure at various levels. The musicians are asked to play on instruments for which they have had no training and which they therefore cannot possibly master, while at the same time, some parts of the piece demand that they imitate field recordings of traditional non-Western music played from tape – which, again, they cannot possibly accomplish. But the most obvious and famous example is probably the so-called 'Ballet for Non-Dancers' 'Kontra → Danse' from the 'Scenic Composition' *Staatstheater* (1970), which, as the title suggests, asks for untrained performers to execute classical ballet moves (the performers have to try as hard as they can, so that they genuinely fail, rather than just enacting failure). Depending on the production, *Staatstheater* can be the occasion for numerous sorts of failures on several levels. *Acustica: Music for Experimental Sound Producers, Loudspeakers and Two to Five Players* (1970) is another flexible, open composition that provides potential to dramatize failure in myriad ways. As in the previously named pieces, the musicians have to play on a large number of experimental, self-built or unusual instruments, and in this case the piece is notated on a set of A5 filing cards, each containing a brief musical segment for one player. These cards can be distributed and combined, simultaneously and successively, in any way. Therefore, the rules of the game and the way in which the performers collaborate are not pre-established but have to be negotiated by the musicians themselves. Where the traditional idea of professionalism in music relies on the seemingly flawless execution of an existing script, any performance of *Acustica* has to be provisional and ad hoc.

Kagel's interest in failure as evidenced in his experimental work is hardly incidental, considering, for instance, eldritch Priest's (2013) insistence on failure as a central category of experimental music. Sara Jane Bailes (2011, 26–27) makes a similar point when she reflects on the importance of failure in certain forms of Performance Theatre:

The discourse of failure as reflected in western art and literature seems to counter the very idea of progress and victory that simultaneously dominate historical narratives. It undermines the perceived stability of mainstream capitalist ideology's preferred aspiration to achieve, succeed, or win, and the accumulation of

wealth as proof and effect arranged by those aims. Failure challenges the cultural dominance of instrumental rationality and the fictions of continuity that bind the way we imagine and manufacture the world.

At this point, it would be remiss not to quote Samuel Beckett (1984, 145), for whom failure was an essential aspect, if not the very essence, of creative work: ‘To be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living.’ This sort of ‘aesthetics of failure’ would appear to redeem some of the problems inherent in Kagel’s experimental practice, whether the failure they embody is intentional or not. In a conversation with Sylvère Lotringer, Paul Virilio (2005, 62) has similarly embraced failure, in particular genuinely accidental (rather than intentional) failure:

To acknowledge [...] that there is failure [...] is to recognize that there is hope. ... Failure is not a condemnation! It’s not the same thing. Failure is failure. Failure is an accident: art has tripped on the rug. In any case, you should forget my logic of failure, my logic of the accident. In my view, the accident is positive. Why? Because it reveals something important that we would not otherwise be able to perceive. (Lotringer 2005, 60–63)

He argues further that ‘*the very success of the arts has been a failure*’ (italics in the original), a comment that resonates with some of my observations on Kagel. The deliberately paradoxical formulation hints at a problem, however, suggesting that what Bailes calls a ‘discourse of failure’ may only result in a simple reversal of values, meaning that failure is as uncritically embraced as success was celebrated hitherto. It is one thing to critique ‘instrumental rationality’ as Bailes does, but what if the valorization accorded to failure is itself based on an instrumental logic? Priest seems particularly keen to avoid such a reversal: ‘failure can only ever succeed, and this success is failure’s failure.’ (2013, 3). For this reason, failure cannot be instrumentalized, not even as a form of critique as advocated by Bailes: ‘failure has no particular point, [...] it is radically perspectival and, ultimately, despite the regularities that restrict its measure, radically indeterminate.’ (Priest 2013, 6)

In this sense, then, Kagel explored failure as an aesthetic agenda in his experimental work; as I am going to show, he at the same time failed to realize his intentions. It would be simplistic to say that this latter failure came as a result of his attempt to instrumentalize failure, although he may have underestimated the complexity of an aesthetics of failure that Priest hints at. The repertoire in question is characterized by a number of binary tensions: between what has been called ‘distributed creativity’ (Clarke, Doffman, and Lim 2013) and compositional control, openness and closure, an oral performance culture and a score-based

literate tradition, a preference for the supposed authenticity and unrepeatability of the live event and a heightened awareness of technological mediation, and, as will be the focus of my comments, between community-based music-making and the aesthetic criteria of high art. Kagel was hardly the only one to perceive these conflicts: the long 1960s were the heyday of socially and politically committed music – in classical composition as much as in popular music and jazz – and many composers felt compelled to enlist their work for various causes (cf. Adlington 2009; Kutschke and Norton 2013; Kutschke 2008; Jacobshagen, Leniger, and Henn 2007). Even where direct political motivation seems to have played a limited role, as for instance in the case of Karlheinz Stockhausen, there was a search for hippy-ish collective and open modes of musical expression. Nevertheless, the inherent contradictions were particularly stark in the case of Kagel, not least since he seemed to deny that there might be a choice to be made, and pretended that the demands of a socially-committed community-based musical practice could be easily reconciled with his imprint as composer and the highest standards of art.

My primary examples are two TV programmes that Kagel made (or that were made of him) in the 1970s, featuring *Tactil* for Three (1970) and *Unter Strom* for Three Players (1969), respectively.⁴ In both, he performed with the guitar duo of Wilhelm Bruck and Theodor Ross, forming the Kölner Ensemble für Neue Musik, a flexible group of usually two to five performers that Kagel had set up for his work. The TV programme of *Unter Strom* was produced by *Televisione svizzera di lingua italiana* (TSI, Swiss Television in Italian) in 1975 and entitled ‘Il teatro musicale di Mauricio Kagel’ (Kagel 1975). An audio-visual recording of a complete performance of *Unter Strom* is prefaced by an interview with the composer, visually intercut with footage of the setting-up process as well as other works. The interview is held in Italian; Kagel’s linguistic difficulties and the lack of opportunity for revision (which he always undertook with printed interviews) may have forced him to simplify his comments, for the interview presents one of the most succinct accounts of his aesthetic ideas and compositional principles. Thus, he outlines how the evolution of musical language has always been coupled with the development of musical instruments. In that sense, his approach to using experimental sound generators is based on traditional principles, although it is applied to non-classical means. The material changes, but musical thought continues. This leads him to suggest that all expressive means, including lighting, gestures

⁴ Both videos are archived at the Mauricio Kagel Collection of the Paul Sacher Stiftung Basel. I would like to thank the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland for the award of a travel grant allowing me to study the materials.

and space are musical. Even in the classical theatre, a Shakespeare production by a true *homme du théâtre* is inherently musical; it just so happens that people tend to look for what they already know, by which Kagel appears to refer to an Aristotelian, inherently logocentric conception of drama. So far so good.

But Kagel makes another claim: pointing to the price of musical instruments, he argues that music is not inherently a bourgeois art form but that it has become one. In an age of democratization (of which he believed himself to be a part), the use of experimental sound producers is an attempt to open up art to the masses. As he sees it, serious art cannot be practised without a consideration of the economic context: the artist cannot solve society's problems, but he (in Kagel's case) can propose ideas, and his idea is to make art with everyday objects. As he succinctly puts it: primitive means but refined art.

Similar ideas crop up in relation to many other pieces from the time: Kagel composed for amateur musicians in *Programm* (1972), non-musicians (if you will) in *Probe* (1971), military musicians in *Klangwehr* (1970), and children in *1898* (1973) and *Zählen und Erzählen* (1976). Similar ideas to those expressed in the TV programme on *Unter Strom* pepper his interviews and programme notes from the time, as when he closes an interview on *Ludwig van* (1970) with the words: 'all this I'm giving as an introduction and encouragement: the musicians may now go further', suggesting that 'the work' and his own authorship of it is incidental and should only be seen as an example for musicians' own creative engagement with traditional musical materials.⁵ In other words, the idea of an anti-elitist and collective practice lies at the heart of Kagel's experimental work from the period, and it is consistently expressed both in his statements and, to an extent, his compositional practice. To avoid misunderstanding, I take no issue with these aims; indeed I admire them. I just think that he failed to realize them.

One indication of this is his failure to reach those he professed to address: here the other video is indicative. *Tactil* is a production by the Westdeutscher Rundfunk and again features an audiovisual recording of a performance of the work in question, this time followed by a studio discussion with students. The latter, predictably, is a bit of a disaster: the students primarily express their complete incomprehension. Furthermore, no matter how much Kagel was regarded as an *enfant terrible* within the field of avant-garde music, for the students he is a representative of precisely that field and hence a member of the establishment. Although Kagel does a reasonably good job at turning the tables and exposing some of the students as

⁵ The interview was published in the liner notes to the LP recording of the work: *Mauricio Kagel: Ludwig van*, DGG, 2530014.

reactionaries, no-one emerges with much credit. These kinds of experiences were repeated on a number of occasions, perhaps most strikingly in the premiere of *Programm*, where the discussions with audiences, which were a feature of the composition, went in ways that were not fully anticipated. The responses of the amateur musicians, the supposed ‘beneficiaries’ of the composition, appear to have been rather mixed as well.

Negative audience responses have of course been a feature of modernist music at least since Stravinsky’s *Sacre*, and they are frequently a perverse source of pride; that is the elitist high-art position as pointed out in John Carey’s (Carey 2012) excoriating analysis, among others. But they are a problem for music that claims to be community-based. When you argue that your work is aimed at the masses and presents examples that can be applied by others, as apparently Kagel did, if no-one then follows your example and if the masses remain at best indifferent and at worst hostile, you have failed.

The reasons for that failure are manifold and cannot all be laid at Kagel’s door, and failing honourably as, by and large, he did, is preferable to not having tried. Nevertheless, the failure has to be conceded and some of the causes analysed. One issue concerns the claim about the primitive means that are supposedly available to all.⁶ On the face of it, the scrapyards instrumentation of such pieces as *Unter Strom* and others is obviously all-inclusive. But only up to a point: there is quite a lot one can do with primitive means, but one also soon reaches their limits. Note that all the compositions concerned use an extraordinary number of sound generators, none employed for long, and such a practice requires resources, such as space, tools and time. Kagel always had a workshop of some sort: the Labor zur Erforschung akustischer und visueller Ereignisse e.V. (Laboratory for the Exploration of Acoustic and Visual Events, registered association), of which he was a member (it was essentially his creation), for instance, was an actual place. Again, these things cost money. When I was young, I didn’t spend much time experimenting with trash; like millions of others, I played in rock bands. The necessary resources were expensive for us but not beyond our means. Traditional musics, not to mention choral singing tend to require even fewer resources—which leads me to the question: is the use of everyday objects really the best means to open music to all?

But the more significant problem clearly was the lack of sustained community engagement. This is not to deny the sincerity of Kagel’s engagement with the various

⁶ Priest (2013, 27) argues that an aesthetics of failure is a sign of (gender, class, race and educational) privilege: ‘while in theory, “everyone” has the potential to fail, in practice only those who have always (already) succeeded as social agents can play with failing, and in Western culture this has traditionally been the prerogative of men, particularly white, straight, and University-educated men.’

communities addressed by his pieces, yet the fact remains that these were typically one-off outreach exercises as part of specific compositions. The overall structure of high-art musical culture remained unaffected: Kagel worked as a professional composer, typically with his own group of professional musicians. Whatever roles children, amateur musicians and others played, they typically served his ends and were subservient to his status as composer, with all the prestige invested in that position within the Western classical tradition. To be fair, that particular role was not one that he created for himself but that he inherited almost by default, and he may well have felt uncomfortable with it. Nevertheless, I can see little evidence of his seriously challenging or overturning that position.

A similar point can be made about the working practices with his collaborators. It is impossible for outsiders to arrive at an informed judgement on this, but all the indications are that the experimental works of the long 1960s are at least partly the result of fairly open-ended, exploratory and improvisatory processes, to which his collaborators, typically the Kölner Ensemble für Neue Musik, made integral contributions (cf. Kunkel 2011). Yet the credit went to Kagel alone. Granted, in some cases he implicitly or explicitly critiqued the concepts of the musical work and copyright, notably in *Metapiece (Mimesis) / Mimesis (Metapiece)* for Piano (1961), which can be performed with another work by a living composer (the instructions remain silent on what is to happen now that he is dead himself), or *Montage* (1967), which consists of nothing more than the instruction to combine parts of various of his own compositions. In *Ludwig van*, the concept becomes almost farcical: a musical work by one composer that consists of nothing more than some ideas of how to perform the works of another composer; in other words, not a work at all, but an instruction for performance practice. Furthermore, once again, it wasn't Kagel's fault that the structures of musical life and the roles accorded to the various participants (composer, conductor, performer, audience) no longer reflected the artistic realities and the degree of collaboration between the different parties that, if not strictly non-hierarchical, at least challenged clear-cut, hierarchical divisions. Still, he did little to consistently challenge those structures, which benefited him personally.

At this point, I reluctantly find myself in partial agreement with an article by Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich, which I severely criticized in an earlier publication (Heile 2007). Jungheinrich (1973, 23) had argued that

Kagel's music-pedagogical approach would be consistent, if it were based on a historical theory and relevant social ethics. But it is precisely that which Kagel brackets out. He seems to have come to a point in his

reflections at the moment, where music-making can once again be described as an ideology. Where practice ought to be connected with political content, Kagel chickens out, and, with the anxiety of a senior monetization strategist worried about his unique claim to validity, even denounces art-transcending motivations as ‘armchair Marxism’.

To be clear, I do not harbour the slightest sympathy for Jungheinrich’s attitude of people’s commissar for proletarian composition, but his observation that Kagel shied away from concrete engagement and, in the final analysis, wanted his work to be understood in purely aesthetic terms is perceptive. Jungheinrich claims that his argument was shared by others, specifically naming Heinz-Klaus Metzger, Reinhard Oehlschlägel, and Ulrich Schreiber. If he is right (and it is true that these critics had largely distanced themselves from Kagel at the time), it would suggest that by the early 1970s, Kagel’s insistence on his own exalted position as composer was no longer taken for granted.

In terms of the idea of the musical collective, the experiments which Kagel undertook with both the Kölner Ensemble and, in a different way, the Labor, were hardly taking place in a vacuum. Its spirit is clearly informed by Fluxus (however ambivalent Kagel’s response to it). Furthermore, this was the peak period of improvising ensembles, a movement that started in the early 1960s and gathered steam by the late ‘60s and early ‘70s (Feisst 2014; Beal 2009; Gebhardt and Whyton 2015). Many, if not most of these groups were a lot more radical in embracing an egalitarian ethos and collective creativity, prioritizing performance over score and notation and engaging with diverse communities, and fostering inclusive, participatory music-making than anything Kagel ever undertook.

In saying this, I do not want to open up a competition about who is the most progressive and radical, and I am certainly not arguing that the work of those aforementioned is superior to Kagel’s: *Staatstheater*, *Ludwig van*, *Acustica*, *Exotica*, and *(Hörspiel): Ein Aufnahmезustand* (1969) are among the richest and most fascinating pieces from the period. Nor do I want to idolize the work and practices of some of the groups mentioned, many of which were beset with problems. What I *do* want to do is put Kagel’s practice into context: it seems clear to me that his experimental work needs to be viewed in relation to this context and cannot be understood in isolation, as typically happens in the Kagel literature, as if it emerged purely from his own ideas. Furthermore, what this comparison highlights is that what is unusual about Kagel’s practice at the time is not the degree to which he was willing and able to relinquish compositional control, but the degree to which he was *unwilling* or

unable to do so, putting some of the characteristics of that work and the reasons for its failure into sharp relief.

This brings me back to the opening and a consideration of the interview in the TV programme on *Unter Strom*. In it Kagel explains:

MK: What is *Unter Strom*? *Unter Strom* is a chamber piece sounding with a great seriousness and with great emotion of communication and with elements which are completely – not absurd – but totally non-artistic.

Interviewer: Raw?

MK: Raw!

In other words, his criteria are aesthetic in a traditional sense, and, as I pointed out, he explicitly claimed a place in the tradition of Western classical music for himself. The slogan ‘primitive means but refined art’ could not be clearer. In this, too, he was remarkably consistent, emphasizing equally his social credentials and his claims to artistry. But are his experimental works really as rich, sophisticated and subtle as the masterworks of the past or indeed the present? Can you really compose with ‘actors, cups, tables, omnibuses and oboes’ (Nicolai 1987) as he claimed, and as we seem to never tire of repeating? And what are the criteria by which to judge them? This final question remains unanswered, and it is interesting how little Kagel had to say about this and to what extent he fell back on generic assertions – e.g. ‘great seriousness and great emotion’. There are fascinating pieces among the works from the period, but I do not think *Unter Strom* is one of them. More than others, it seems to disintegrate into its individual components, some of which I find interesting to experience, others less so. The order of the elements and their combination appears arbitrary, and there is little sense – at least to me – of any overarching shape to the piece, never mind ‘coherence’ or ‘unity’. Moreover, I fear that Kagel’s usually assured theatrical instinct abandoned him. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Heile 2016), the instrumental theatre is based on what Michael Kirby called ‘non-matrixed performing’ and ‘non-matrixed representation’, whereby musicians do not act in the sense of role-play but simply perform prescribed actions. In *Unter Strom*, however, the performers step out of their role as musicians and start enacting characters, complete with psychological states – ‘received acting’ in Kirby’s terminology. Thus, in one scene, the score asks the performer to venerate a fan, as if it ‘emanates a magical radiation’. And the final scene sees a guitarist trapped in the so-called frame-harp, an instrument made out of long steel wires, which we are now invited to view as an electric fence. His death struggle is further dramatized through a regular pulse that seems to represent

a heartbeat, the ceasing of which signals the end of the piece. There are obviously different ways to respond to this, but I find the shifting between music-making and non-matrixed performance, on the one hand, and received acting on the other, more than a little awkward. I also find the final death scene embarrassingly melodramatic, the continued guitar-playing – the very embodiment of a category error – adding a frankly ridiculous note.

One poor piece: not a big story admittedly. But what it may highlight is the extent to which Kagel had manoeuvred himself into an impossible position: pursuing both social and aesthetic aims in equal measure, he ended up failing to achieve either. His engagement with the communities he addressed was too inconsistent and too external to make any real difference. Equally, his aesthetic criteria were too vague and insufficiently thought-through to ground an experimental praxis; his reliance on traditional aesthetic criteria was no longer suited to the radically new means, including what might be called an aesthetics of failure, that he explored.

The aim to integrate social engagement and aesthetic value is worthy if utopian, but we should be under no illusions that Kagel failed to achieve it. His dallying with an aesthetics of failure suggests that, at one level, he saw its potential to transcend traditional aesthetic criteria and act as a basis for a new experimental practice that would reconcile both artistic and social aims, but he seemed unable to fully put it into practice. Starting in the 1970s, he successively abandoned both social aims and experimental approaches, embracing instead conventional composition for largely traditional forces, contexts and genres, a development we have to accept even if not embrace. In Kagel's retrospective reflections on this period, a note of bitterness and resignation is unmistakable, as when he comments on his abandonment of experimentalism (Johnson 1989): 'Basta! I don't do this anymore.'

The Failure of Scholarship

In outlining Kagel's failure – both as thematized in his own compositions and as experienced by himself – I want to make a contribution to a more even-handed, independent critical discourse on new music and the work of individual composers, as demanded by Cook and others. For such an approach it is essential that a composer's pronouncements are part of the subject matter under investigation, not a tool for its analysis (cf. Holtsträter 2010, 7–14). The immanent theoretical coherence of a composer's position, its ideological character, and its value and relevance for the work must be scrupulously examined rather than blithely taken for granted. In other words, I do not deny that composers' statements can be relevant for an

understanding of their work, and we should study the two in conjunction, reading them off against one another. But we must not assume that a composer's values, views and ideologies are consistent, above critique and seamlessly realized in their work, or that they explain all or even the most relevant and interesting aspects of it. There is a place here for the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' as introduced by Paul Ricoeur. In his *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur (2008, 32) contrasts conventional interpretation as a 'restoration of meaning' with what he calls 'the school of suspicion', represented by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, whose practice is characterized by 'demystification', or, as he has it, the 'reduction of the illusion and lies of consciousness'. Indeed, what the three 'masters of suspicion' had in common is that they looked upon 'the whole of consciousness primarily as "false" consciousness' (Ricoeur 2008, 33). What, according to Ricoeur, the school of suspicion teaches us is to read between the lines and against the grain, to pay attention not only to what subjects reveal but what they conceal, whether from us or from themselves. The 'redemptive critique', as practised by the Frankfurt School, is a related approach, of which Adorno's *Versuch über Wagner (In Search of Wagner)* (Adorno 2005) is a particularly interesting example. Both approaches seem to me to be rather more constructive and interesting than traditional music biography, particularly in the field of new music. Without wanting to make grand claims, I would like to think that my own practice is informed by these traditions.

But Cook's (2003, 260) argument goes beyond a demand for more detachment:

I would like [...] to propose an indefinite moratorium [...] on equations of academic research and aesthetic approval. [...] It seems to me that the idea of the musical academy acting as some kind of quality control, with musicologists or theorists issuing admission tickets to a canonic hall of fame, is way past its sell-by date, and that the prerequisite for a more open-minded approach to musical culture than musicology has traditionally had is a more modest intellectual ambition: to register, to describe, to establish the facts as they are.

Even if we agree about the problem, Cook's solution appears to throw out the baby with the bathwater. His prescription 'to register, to describe, to establish the facts as they are' appears to hearken back to the ideal of scholarly objectivity embodied by positivism. Despite its occasional reductiveness, it is worth reminding ourselves at this point of the critique of positivism articulated by Joseph Kerman in his *Contemplating Music* (1985), for which Cook and Mark Everist expressed considerable sympathy in their *Rethinking Music* (1999, vi–vii). For Kerman, the preferred counterpart to the discredited 'positivism' of traditional musicology is 'criticism'. And it is to criticism to which I have turned in my discussion of

failure in the experimental work of Mauricio Kagel. I don't know what would have been 'the facts' to be established in this case, and what there was to register or to describe, and I am not sure that mattered. What *did* matter were the *reasons* behind the developments, the motivations for Kagel choosing to adopt an experimental, socially engaged and community-based aesthetic, only to abandon it later on. His partial conciliation with traditional genres, institutions and concert situations, with their accustomed relations between composers, performers and audiences, implies an admission of failure and a critique of his earlier work. Although he never distanced himself from his earlier work or analysed its potential shortcomings in the kind of terms that I have adopted here, his exclamation of 'basta!' is clear enough. It demands an *explanation*. In research on new music and the work of composers, objective scholarship may have its place, but what is required above all is criticism. To quote one of the greatest critics, Walter Benjamin (1996, 460), on the critic's technique: 'II. He who cannot take sides should keep silent. [...] V. "Objectivity" must always be sacrificed to partisanship, if the cause fought for merits this.'

This is not to fall back into the uncritical position criticized earlier: partisanship is described as an option in particular circumstances, and we know from his practice that Benjamin was a subtle and nuanced critic who was uninterested in Manichean ascriptions of good or bad art. Rather, what he was counselling against was the façade of disinterestedness. In a similar way, I have employed the tools of criticism here to uncover what I regard as shortcomings in Kagel's work.

Despite Cook's further qualifications, I doubt that we can ever be value-free, neutral and objective. More importantly, I haven't got the slightest intention or inclination to be, and the very idea seems to me to misconstrue the nature of scholarship and the public function of musicology. I entered this profession out of my passion for music; renouncing that would amount to a betrayal of what I believe in. I believe that the same is true of my students: they are coming to me and my colleagues full of passion (ideally) and they are hungry to make new discoveries (hopefully). The last they want and deserve is a dispassionate 'registering, describing and establishing of the facts as they are'. I also believe that the greatest scholarship and criticism is ultimately driven by passion for its subject – usually love although sometimes scorn. In the same way, I started to write and talk about music, including that of Kagel, because I felt passionate about it and wanted to pass that on to others.

The reasons are simple: music as a subject would not exist without people's love and enthusiasm for it. Why else would we want to write or talk about it? This is one of the issues that separate the arts and humanities from the social, natural and medical sciences. We are

not disinterested observers studying a phenomenon from an external position; we are part and parcel of what we study. This does not absolve us from scholarly rigour – on the contrary – but that rigour should not be confused with objectivity. The ‘intellectual ambition to register, to describe, to establish the facts as they are’ only makes sense if we are already convinced that the facts *matter*. Providing the reasons why they should requires criticism. As so often, then, Nick has put his finger on an urgent problem, but faithful students intent on following his example may need to become renegades.

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