

contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Kosviner, David. 1989. 'New Music-Theatre in Stuttgart'. *Contact*, 34. pp. 32-36. ISSN 0308-5066.

David Kosviner

**New Music-Theatre in
Stuttgart (und Kagel ist
auch dabei)**

Tage für Neue Musik, Stuttgart, 17–30 November 1988

Since its humble beginnings almost a decade ago, the *Tage für Neue Musik, Stuttgart* (Stuttgart New-Music Days) has grown into a low-key festival lasting a fortnight. Low-key only because it has not yet managed to become a drawing card similar to the festivals in Donaueschingen, Witten and Darmstadt. The Stuttgart festival has a different theme each year, which may either be a featured composer or new music combined with another genre. In 1984 the focus was on Iannis Xenakis, in 1985 on Helmut Lachenmann; in 1986 the theme was 'Music and Film', in 1987 Bernd Alois Zimmermann; 1988 was devoted to 'New Music-Theatre', and Heinz Holliger will take his turn in 1989 (the year in which he turns 50). The usually independent composer's studio ('Atelier') that the South German Radio annually presents was, due to a rather major overlap, incorporated into the *Tage für Neue Musik*: their featured composer for 1988 was Mauricio Kagel.

The first concert was titled 'Hommage à György Ligeti' and was the only concert to be repeated – twice, in fact. Mostly earlier pieces by Ligeti, either little known or known only by reputation, were performed by students of the Stuttgart Musikhochschule. *Rondeau* (1976) for an actor is more theatre than music although the *rondo* form of the title is wonderfully preserved throughout. A tape recorder, which he activated every so often, was the only company that the actor had on stage. The piece is slightly absurdist, witty, thought-provoking and

entertaining. It asks questions about life in general and takes pot-shots at certain sacred cows. Stephan Moos, who is not a student at the Hochschule but appeared as a guest, gave a brilliant and excellent performance. The *Trois Bagatelles for David Tudor* (1961) are quite obviously Ligeti's 'answer' to Cage's 4'33", except that Ligeti's piece has one note played right at the beginning. This 'staged' version (by the pianist David Mattingly) included a page-turner, two bravo-callers in the audience as well as the pianist. As the composition contains only musical instructions, the theatrical elements were the invention of the performer. Mattingly played the part of a stiff and arrogant soloist who had to nod his head demonstratively before the page-turner noticed him and came over from her chair (she was sitting rather far away from the piano) to flip over to the next *bagatelle*. The accessories and affectations of concert soloists were ruthlessly examined, but how much of this detracted from Ligeti's conceptual work about music *per se*? I, for one, would have been happier with a 'straight' performance instead of Mattingly's theatre-piece which seemed to tell us a lot more about what was going on in his head rather than in Ligeti's.

The *Aventures* (1962) and *Nouvelles Aventures* (1962-65) were excellently sung/laughed/hissed/etc. by Stephanie Field (contralto) and Naoki Ota (baritone), both students at the Musikhochschule's opera school, as well as by Monika Meier-Schmid (soprano), who stepped in at the last minute for the indisposed Gail McGowen. Whereas *Aventures* places more emphasis on theatrical gestures, *Nouvelles Aventures* becomes musically considerably more demanding. In *Aventures* Ligeti concerns himself with parodying speech, gestures, singing, singers, social intercourse and society itself. A sense of refinement then enters into *Nouvelles Aventures*; the theatrical elements now result from the music-making rather than the other way round. The percussionist smashing a whole tea-service (tray and all), into a box that seemed to have been designed for this very purpose, elicited spontaneous outbursts of laughter from some members of the audience who were obviously not prepared for such an occurrence. Michael Zilm conducted the young and enthusiastic ensemble with conviction and was thereby very convincing.

The musical, and possibly theatrical, high point of the evening was the *Poème Symphonique* (1962) for 100 metronomes. On stage were five tables each with twenty metronomes. Five 'players' (one per table) carefully wound up the instruments, the conductor appeared, gave a highly exaggerated cue, and the metronomes were set in motion. Then – again very carefully and quietly – the conductor padded off, the 'players' soon following suit. By this time, of course, some members of the audience were giggling, and it would have now been very difficult to convince them that a serious, perhaps even deadly serious, piece were being performed. It is about decay and therefore possibly about death; it is about listening into a single sound: putting it under a microscope, as it were, and then perceiving the tiny but numerous differences between the metronomes; it is about incredible rhythmic complexity resulting from the layering of many periodic pulses. In a way, this composition examines some of the very origins of music and simultaneously points the way in which other composers' music would go or had already gone: Helmut Lachenmann, Giacinto Scelsi, Conlon Nancarrow and Harrison Birtwistle are names that

come to mind. The reaction of the public was most interesting. Soon after the start, the giggling turned into conversation: many people simply assumed that the clatter of 100 ticking machines may have been worthy of being called 'background music', but did not warrant the attention that active listening demands. Some were convinced that this was nothing but a gag, others thought that it was a downright cheek to present such a piece to a paying public! Some interested listeners tried to hush the talkers, but did not have much success. However, towards the end of the piece, as the metronomes fell out one by one, the audience became silent and actually started hearing the music that was emanating from the stage. The serious listening atmosphere that the piece had created was destroyed by placing the last metronome left ticking on a pedestal and giving it a victor's bouquet!! This ridiculous and tasteless act (whose perpetrator should never again be engaged for similar concerts) was not repeated at the subsequent performances.

Quintett (1984/88) by Hans-Peter Jahn (born 1948) was in fact a double quintet for five actors and five string players. The composer/author describes his composition as a 'theatre-piece with music'. This should not lead to any false assumptions that the music is only incidental – on the contrary, it is essential for the realisation of the composition as a whole. In his programme notes, Jahn describes, to a certain extent, how the piece is constructed: it is in five acts with 25 scenes, to which fifteen music-pieces or movements have been composed. The music has been constructed so as not to act as an illustration of the scenic/dramatic events, with the individual movements being divided into three quintets, three quartets, three trios, three duos and three solos. The action took place on two levels: the actors performed on a slightly raised, square platform (thereby limiting their mobility) with the string quintet being higher up and behind them on a 'proper' stage. The contrast between the actors, performing in mud and dust, and the string players, immaculate in their tails, was obviously also part of the theatre. The play reflects a very strong awareness that many writers have nowadays concerning the destruction of the environment and the threat of nuclear disaster. Jahn also writes about that peculiarly human ailment of being in a negative situation but not doing anything to make it positive because it is still, in spite of its negativity, somehow comfortable. The five characters, whose conditions are partly of their own making, all belong in this category. They seem to be survivors on a post-apocalyptic hell-island . . . or perhaps they are already dead. Throughout the play they do have opportunities to change, but only one actually finds the courage to move on to something different.

Jahn's music is very interesting in that I cannot put a label on it, nor place it in any particular category. Consonance and tonality are present, but not in the manner one expects them to be. Jahn exploits the ambiguity that is inherent in, and basic to, tonality. Certain tonal formulas, well known from harmony lessons, are resolved 'incorrectly'. At one point the music sounded as if it could have been Richard Strauss and, just as I began to ask what this late Romanticism was doing there, it took a sudden turn and went off in a completely different direction. The music could be described as 'traditional' in that it is very rhythmic – almost Stravinskyan in parts – without being motoric, and tonally consonant without being conventional.

The harmonic language because of the unexpected twists and turns, remained fresh and full of surprises. The theatre, which I found gripping, was well integrated with the music. They were equal partners: sometimes together, more often alternating with one another, but always complementary.

How can one adequately translate the punning title *Schach dem Dreiklang* into English? The answer is that one can't. *Schach dem König* literally means 'putting the King into check' or, as English-speaking chess-players are wont to exclaim: 'Check!' The title that Ulrich Süsse (born 1944) chose for his composition can therefore best be translated as 'putting the triad into check', and that is what he did during his two-hour happening. The action, quite naturally, took place on a gigantic chess-board. The black pawns were represented by soprano and tenor saxophones, the white pawns by violins and violas. The castles were represented by horn players, the knights by oboists, the bishops by flautists, the kings by double-bass players and the queens by two contraltos. In the programme, the conductor is referred to not as such, but as the referee. In addition to the above-mentioned participants there were also two chess-playing 'personalities' (in this case, an ex-beauty queen and a boxer), a chess commentator as well as the use of live electronics, tapes and video. An interesting aspect of this composition is that most of the music is directly derived from the actions. Each square on the chess-board is identified by a set of co-ordinates one of which is a numeral (from one to eight) and the other a letter from A to H). The letters then determine the pitches to be played (in German, 'H' is the nomenclature for 'B'), and the pieces, when moving, then change pitch accordingly. In addition there were different motifs indicating whether a piece was in a defensive or offensive position, and there was a short theme played to indicate the intention to move.

The performance fell into two sections: the first was a through-composed piece based on a game that had already been played, then after a short interval, another game was played live. The first half was much better as fewer factors were left to chance. During the second half the 'personalities' played a rather boring game, and the musicians (who needed to be aware of their positions, as well as their functions, at any given moment) did not seem particularly interested in responding to the situations as they changed from move to move. I am sure that they would have preferred playing 'with dots' – they may then have had to practise more but not think nearly so much. Pre-recorded video and audio tapes were introduced at appropriate moments, as were live electronics and video. The pre-recorded material once again demonstrated Süsse's irreverent and mischievous way of taking on venerated customs of the past in an attempt to illuminate the present. Even though his intentions may have been above criticism, the realisation of them, or attempt thereof, was not. The composer commented after the performance that rehearsal time was, as ever, sorely lacking. Perhaps another performance, this time with better rehearsal conditions, could be mounted to demonstrate what potential still has to be realised.

The '*Atelier* Mauricio Kagel' consisted of a question-and-answer session with the composer, followed by three concerts. The musicologist Werner Klüppelholz, who has written extensively about Kagel's music, chaired the first event. Kagel spoke eloquently and with humour about the theatrical elements in his

music, emphasising that he composed *music-theatre* and not *music-theatre*. He spoke, naturally, with special reference to the compositions that were to be performed in the subsequent concerts, as well as about certain themes which pervade almost all of his work. These included, in addition to music, his interests in religion and society – their similarities, their differences and ways in which he tried to make them interact with one another. This ‘conversation with the composer’ also included a screening of the film version of *Dressur* which was to be performed the following evening.

The percussion trio, Le Cercle (Jean-Pierre Drouet, Willy Coquillat and Gaston Sylvestre) began the first concert with a performance of *Exotica* (1972) for non-European instruments. The Rumanian pan-pipe virtuoso, Gheorghe Zamfir, may be surprised to learn that his instrument – one of which was included in the performance – is not European and, by implication, neither is he nor his country of origin! During the quasi-shamanistic rituals that ensued, I could not help thinking that this cultural banditry did nothing but belittle the music of other cultures. *The Hippocratic Oath* (1984), for piano played by three hands, had the members of Le Cercle all playing with their left hands only, and each sitting on his own piano stool. As soon as the players seated themselves, it became clear that the stools were at different levels: the one furthest from the audience was too high, the one in the middle was correct and the nearest one was too low. Some giggling rippled through the audience. The piece ended with the players piling their hands one on top of another à la the Three Musketeers: all for one and one for all! I’m afraid that I cannot write anything about the music as it proved to be immediately forgettable. *La Trahison Orale* (Oral Treason) of 1983 was presented in an instrumental version completed in the same year. In this piece the performers were shoeless as well as having their left socks missing. I am still asking why. As the narration (in French) was probably of prime importance, I can only assume that three-quarters of the piece went over my head as I don’t understand any of the language. The music sounded like a combination of French *chanson* and film-music – some parts sounded uncannily like the music to a slightly less-than-serious television series about a *fin-de-siècle* French rogue (naturally of the lovable, good-hearted type.) Here the players did not limit themselves to percussion instruments but played piano, synthesizers and dulcimer as well. The last piece of the evening, *Dressur* (Dressage), dates from 1977 and is called a ‘percussion trio for wood instruments’. As can be discerned from the title, Kagel has drawn an analogy between musical performance and the circus. The instruments played were of an incredible variety: the usual wooden instruments that every percussionist is expected to play were there, as were the more unusual non-European instruments and certain instruments that are not generally considered as such: chairs, sticks and clogs. The piece was humorous, but the humour was only in the theatre and not in the music. This composition, as well as many others by Kagel, lives from its theatrical aspects: if the music were removed, the theatre could still stand on its own, but if the theatre were removed, the remaining music would not be substantial enough to support itself. A few words must be said about the performers. The Parisian percussionists were thoroughly professional: both their competence and *engagement* are to be highly praised.

The second Kagel concert featured the internationally well-known Saschko Gawriloff (violin), Siegfried Palm (cello) and Bruno Canino (piano), as well as Mie Miki (playing accordion even though the programme says it was a bandoneon) and Kagel himself as tango singer. This more traditional chamber-music concert featured three works from the 1970s as well as the Piano Trio dating from 1983-85. The earliest of the pieces, *Siegfriedp’* (1972), was the one that appealed most to me. The dedicatee performed it superbly with the required virtuosity and conviction. Kagel calls this piece his contribution to the virtuoso tradition and indeed it is. As in a great deal of contemporary music, the player has to make some vocal interjections in addition to the usual playing. This piece sounded the most modern of those played and one of the few that sounded as though it had something original to offer, in contrast to the many helpings of rehashed older music – with a supposedly new sauce – that were dumped onto our plates. *Klangwölfe* (1979) for violin and piano (extremely well played by Gawriloff and Canino) has very little dynamic range, being mostly around *pianissimo*. This is a natural consequence of the violin playing with a *Tonwolf* mute: a device invented to enable violinists to practise almost inaudibly, thereby not offending any people in their immediate vicinity. None of the musical elements in the piece were particularly interesting, the violin writing relying mostly on romantic gestures – what is known as composing ‘idiomatically’ for the instrument. The *Tango Alemán* (1978) for voice, violin, bandoneon and cello is . . . well, what can I say – I simply prefer Astor Piazzolla. Even if this composition is supposed to be a critique of the tango, its forms and conventions, it doesn’t work: the difference that one is supposed to perceive is so subtle (if existent at all) that it is not perceptible. The Piano Trio (1983-85), with which the concert ended, was composed just after *La Trahison Orale*, and the material already encountered in that piece has simply been put into another instrumentation and had a few modern techniques – such as piano strings being muted and plucked – added to it. This composition is another example of idiomatic writing for a classical combination. This implies that neither barriers nor new ground were broken. The composer preferred to remain in his self-made prison where he, even though incarcerated, knew every nook and cranny and was wonderfully comfortable.

In the third and last Kagel concert, the composer conducted the South German Radio Symphony Orchestra in compositions from the 1980s, including the German première of *Quodlibet* (1986-88) for soprano and orchestra. The soloist, Martine Viard, proved to be an excellent singer-narrator-chanteuse, having the ability and agility to change voices with incredible speed and precision. Kagel used *chanson* texts dating from the 15th century, but no melodies from this period appear in the work. Nevertheless, Kagel does more than hint at the music of this era, but they remain only hints. The violins, violas and cellos were replaced by eight cellos seated in a semi-circle directly in front of the conductor. An electric organ has been included in the instrumentation, not as a substitute for a pipe organ, but as a means of extending the already available mixtures and colours. Orchestral colour does play a large role in this composition, with the harp and piano making unusual and interesting additions to what many people have long considered a dead area. The other works on this programme were

the pieces for winds, double-basses and percussion from *Rrrrrrr . . .* (1982), *Szenario* (1982) for strings and tape and *Finale* (1981) in the version for large orchestra. All these pieces try to be humorous and to work in a very direct manner. They are, as is most of Kagel's output, examples of 'musique impure'. The character pieces (the composer's own description) from *Rrrrrrr . . .* sounded like, amongst others, neo-classical Stravinsky and Mussorgsky, with low brass and bells. In *Szenario*, written originally to accompany the silent film *Un chien andalou* of Buñuel and Dalí, the dog of the title that is always absent eventually makes its appearance – on the tape that Kagel provided for his composition. In *Finale* shades of Mahler could be heard, then it sounded as if the 'Dance of the Cygnets' from *Swan Lake* was about to start. In a percussion cadenza, car horns à la Gershwin's *An American in Paris* were present as was a xylophone part that sounded as if it had escaped from a piece by Kabalevsky. Then the conductor, while conducting, 'collapsed'. The orchestra stopped, stood up, looked at his prone form and then the concert-master directed the proceedings until the end of the piece. The *Dies Irae* was played, and rolls on a muffled side-drum were also there – all of them being musical symbols or representations of death. As a farewell gesture for Clytus Gottwald, the South German Radio's retiring new-music editor, Kagel and the orchestra played a variation from his *Variations without Fugue* for large orchestra on 'Variations and Fugue on a theme of Handel' for piano op. 24 by Johannes Brahms 1861/62 (wow, what a title!).

This large survey of Kagel's output from the seventies and eighties made it very clear that he, having chosen his titles, then takes them very literally. Good examples are the pieces from *Rrrrrrr . . .* and, of course, the conductor collapsing in *Finale*. This, unfortunately, also ensures a lack of subtlety and depth. The 'found objects' with which Kagel works are always being presented in a manner that leaves no room for ambiguity, no room for listening deeper into the pieces – everything is on the surface because the surface is all there is. The two exceptions for me were, as I have already mentioned, *Siegfriedp'* and *Quodlibet*, neither of which tried to be too humorous, nor too direct, but which did attempt to use diverse materials and a certain amount of compositional depth.

Peter Eötvös (born 1944) is well-known as a leading conductor of (mainly) contemporary music, but less familiar as a composer. The last concert of the festival therefore provided a good opportunity to see and hear his *Harakiri*. This piece is written for two alto flutes (the performers sitting Japanese style and making their instruments sound like shakuhachis), a Japanese singer, a pantomime clown (European) and, in the middle of the stage, a 'percussionist' who chopped wood. As the piece of wood is cleaved over and over again, so its pitch rises in proportion to its diminishing size. Unlike Kagel's *Exotica*, this piece does not leave a bad after-taste. Eötvös juxtaposes different cultures, as well as musical processes and tendencies, and lets them interact with one another. Both the theatrical and musical results are interesting, genuinely humorous and thought-provoking. The composer has managed to get under the skin and not just scratch the surface.

Unfortunately, many pieces that were performed seemed, in comparison, to be either sub-standard or a mass of lost opportunities. Yuval Shaked's *Spiegelbild einer Vision* (Reflection of a Vision) was rather ambiguous: an actor was gripping in his delivery of the text, but the music (provided by a string quartet)

proved to be motoric and not particularly interesting. *Klangzeitspektakel* (Sound-Time-Spectacle) by Erhard Karkoschka and Thomas Arns consisted of music with slide-projections, both of which were trying hard to teach the audience something – a little too pedantic for my tastes. The Wasteland Company presented two pieces by William Osborne: *Miriam* (1988) and *Rockaby* (after Samuel Beckett's theatre-piece). Osborne does not have anything new to offer – his music sounds mostly like Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. *Miriam* was nothing but a vehicle for the multi-talented Abby Conant, to prove that she can act, sing and play the trombone. The piano (the only other instrument present) was always played with the damper pedal down so that a pseudo-impressionistic fog ensued. *Did yer hear that* for a pianist by Volker Heyn had a grand piano and the pianist semi-suspended from some scaffolding. The pianist was swathed in bandages and first put plastic gloves on his hands before playing. This piece aimed at being provocative, though not in a positive sense by inviting the audience to experience new musical and theatrical possibilities, but by trying to be 'meaningful' and 'critical', by trying too hard to make a 'statement' about the state of the art and the world. Well, it didn't work and proved to be nothing but primitive and assaulting. Friedhelm Döhl's *Anna K.* was obviously well-meant, wanting to be politically and socially relevant, but did not quite succeed. The piece proved to be predictable after the first few minutes and was not without pretensions.

The Théâtre Européen de Musique Vivante from Brussels presented a rather mixed programme: some of it exceedingly good, some of it hopelessly weak. The main aim of this group (consisting of Annette Sachs, Dominique Grosjean and Piotr Lachert) was to provide humorous and subtle provocation. They also demonstrated that music-theatre pieces do not have to have an extra-musical significance, but that the meaning and the theatre can be derived directly from the music and the actions involved in its performance. *Boleromaniaque* by Dieter Kaufmann elicited a virtuoso solo-performance from one of the female members of the group (the programme did not specify which one.) Dadaistic events had to be performed with great co-ordination and speed, and the effect was truly breathtaking. *Piotr Lunaire* by Boudewijn Buckinx also proved to be great fun although the *Patchwork*, a collage of 90-second compositions by eleven different composers, was weak and disappointing. The most pedantic, most pretentious, most primitive and most boring piece of the festival was Iraj Schimi's *TopoKredo* for string quartet and an actor. Political texts concerning power, deception, the state, violence and the glorification thereof, were delivered by the members of the quartet. The texts were broken down into phrases which were then intoned by the first violinist, then by the second violinist, then by the viola player and then by the cellist. The first violinist then started over again. Needless to say, there were 'significant, pregnant' pauses between the phrases. The musical gestures, which included playing *saltando ad nauseam*, were also extremely primitive. Both the music and the theatre were totally superficial with not one iota of subtlety.

It is to be expected that, during a festival of this length and scope, not only masterpieces could be performed. This and other festivals fulfil the need, not only of presenting the current work of our contemporaries, but also of acting as sieves to sort out the better from the not-so-good. Even if disappoint-

