# Kagel, Mauricio (Raúl) (1931-2008)

**Björn Heile**

Argentine-German composer. One of the most influential composers of the post-war European avant-garde, Kagel was instrumental during the development from the serial composition of the 1950s to the radical experimentalism of the 1960s and ‘70s. A tireless and prolific innovator and polymath, his work often transcends traditional genres and artistic media, incorporating films, radio plays, experimental music theatre and hybrid or mixed-media works in addition to compositions in most traditional musical genres, from piano pieces and string quartets to operas. Many of his works deal with cultural, social and political issues in allusive ways and derive their interest more from their conceptual nature than from their immediate aesthetic effect, suggesting an intellectual kinship with similar tendencies in conceptual or performance art, among others.

Born to cultured Russian-Jewish parents, Kagel studied music privately, notably with Juan Carlos Paz, and read Literature and Philosophy at Buenos Aires University. The influence of Buenos Aires’s rich artistic and musical life, represented particularly by the writers Jorge Luis Borges and Witold Gombrowicz, remained central throughout his career. His early compositions, such as the Variations for Mixed Quartet (1952), often employ twelve-note technique, but there are also more radical experiments, such as *Música para la torre* (*Music for the Tower*, 1954), a series of tape pieces for a steel sculpture, arguably an early example of sound installation or sound sculpture.

Arriving on a scholarship in Cologne in 1957, Kagel studied electronic composition at the famous studio of the WDR (Westdeutscher Rundfunk), whose guiding spirit in those years was Karlheinz Stockhausen. While his earliest works in Europe, such as *Anagrama*, show the composer catching up with the integral serialism championed by Stockhausen and his circle, Kagel’s encounter with John Cage in 1958 brought his witty and iconoclastic side to the fore. During the following years, Kagel seemed to strive to combine the systematic exploration and expansion of musical material pursued by the European avant-garde with the more anarchic experimentalism characteristic of its American counterpart, resulting in such pieces as *Transición II* (1958) and *Improvisation ajoutée* (1962). In addition, he received vital impulses from movements in other arts, such as the theatre of the absurd and fluxus as well as from visual artists from his immediate environment, among them Wolf Vostell and Joseph Beuys.

Kagel’s most prominent contribution is arguably the ‘instrumental theatre’, in which theatrical action is produced by instrumental playing, represented by such works as *Match for Three Players* (1964) and the (anti-)opera *Staatstheater* (1970), although some of his films, notably *Ludwig van* (1970) and his radiophonic pieces, such as *(Hörspiel) Ein Aufnahmezustand* (1971), have likewise proved influential. Starting in the 1970s, he has increasingly looked back to historical models, often ironically as in the abovementioned *Ludwig van*, in many instances, however, with an indefinable mixture of parody and homage, as in the massive oratorio *Sankt-Bach-Passion* (*Saint Bach’s Passion*, 1985).

## Key Works

*Anagrama* for vocal soloists, speaking choir and chamber ensemble (1958)

*Transición I* for electronic sounds (1960)

*Sur scène*: Chamber music theatre piece (1960)

*Heterophonie* for orchestra (1961)

*Antithese* a) Music for electronic and public sounds; b) Play for one actor with electronic and public sounds (1962); film version (1965)

Music for renaissance instruments (1966)

String Quartet I/II (1967)

*Hallelujah* for voices (1968)

*Acustica* for experimental sound producers, loudspeakers and two to five players (1970)

*Exotica* for extra-European instruments (1972)

*Mare nostrum*: Discovery, pacification and conversion of the Mediterranean region by a tribe from Amazonia [music theatre] (1975)

*Der Tribun* (*The Tribune*): Radio play for a political orator, marching sounds and loudspeakers (1979)

*Aus Deutschland*: lieder opera (1979)

Third String Quartet in four movements (1987)

*Die Stücke der Windrose* for salon orchestra (1989-94)

Etudes Nos 2–3 for large orchestra (1996)

*Entführung im Konzertsaal* (*Abduction in the Concert Hall*): Musical report of an incident (1999)

*Fremde Töne und Widerhall* (*Foreign Notes and Echo*) for orchestra (2005)

*In der Matratzengruft* for tenor and ensemble (2008)

## Further Reading

Heile, B. (2006) *The Music of Mauricio Kagel*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

(The only book in English on Kagel and the only one in any language to discuss his entire work up to the time of writing.)

Holtsträter, K. (2010) *Mauricio Kagels musikalisches Werk: Der Komponist als Erzähler, Medienarrangeur und Sammler*, Colgne: Böhlau.

(The most recent and perhaps most ambitious critical study.)

Kagel, M. & Klüppelholz, W. (2001) *Dialoge, Monologe*, Cologne: DuMont.

(Consists of an extremely illuminating extended interview between Klüppelholz and Kagel and some smaller texts by Kagel himself.)

Klüppelholz, W. (1981) *Mauricio Kagel 1970-1980*, Cologne: DuMont.

(Influential study of Kagel’s mid-period works.)

Schnebel, D., (1970) *Mauricio Kagel, Musik, Theater, Film*, Cologne: DuMont.

(Classic study by Schnebel, himself an influential composer and, at the time, close friend of Kagel)