

DLA Thesis Arguments

KLÁRA CSORDÁS

THE VOCAL WORKS OF MAURICIO KAGEL

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I. Background of the research

Mauricio Kagel (1931-2008) was simultaneously one of the most outstanding and one of the most special composers of the 20th century who differed from the European traditions. Vocal works played a significant role in his rich oeuvre. The singing lessons he took in his youth and the years he spent in the Teatro Colón as vocal coach enabled him to know and understand how to use the singing voice. As a result of his inexhaustible imaginativeness he utilized the human voice in the most various ways.

I first encountered Kagel in Hungary in 1986 at a “composer’s night”, conducted by himself, after which I was in close work relationship with him for 22 years. This personal relationship constitutes one of the most important sources of my thesis.

In order to understand the uniqueness of Kagel I had to reach back into, his roots. In the first chapter of the thesis I examine the first twenty-six years of his life and the musical, literary and political atmosphere of Buenos Aires in the hope of approaching an understanding of the composer’s works and figuring out his personal character. His character was definitive for his European work commencing in Germany in 1957. The second chapter deals with his years in Cologne and Darmstadt and discusses his encounter with the contemporary European musical elite and the relationships that took form there. It did not take long to discover that his individuality and great persona were driving him into unavoidable conflicts; here I primarily focus on his relationship with Stockhausen.

After reviewing his most important vocal works, I discuss four works in the fourth chapter: *Mitternachtsstück*, *Ein Brief*, *Quodlibet* and *Der Turm zu Babel*. After a careful preparation together with the composer, adhering to his instructions and often conducted by him, I have sung these pieces on numerous occasions. Firsthand information noted here may provide useful help to singers wishing to perform his works.

The last chapter is a documentation of the 2006 Buenos Aires Kagel Festival. The events of the festival have not been processed anywhere yet, therefore, this chapter fills a gap in the Kagel-research.

The Kagel literature is extremely rich, especially in German. Out of the sources available in German, two must be highlighted as the most reliable ones of my research. First, the interview volumes that are based on his personal statements examining his own oeuvre: *Mauricio Kagel Musik Theater Film* by Dieter Schnebel and second, *Mauricio Kagel 1970-1980 and K..../1991* by Werner Klüppelholz in which Kagel provides an interpretation of his works using the technique of introspection.

As a matter of fact, there is no Kagel literature available in Hungarian. This thesis, utilizing a several decades long personal working relationship with the composer and a contact with his professional and family environment, attempts to offer guidance in understanding the most important vocal works of Kagel.

II. Sources

From the sources available in the German language, the interview volumes by Werner Klüppelholz were of the greatest assistance. For studying the Buenos Aires years, I have relied on the book *Mauricio Kagels Buenos Aires (1946-1957)* by Christina Richter-Ibañez, Michael Gielen's work *Unbedingt Musik* and interviews with still living contemporaries of Kagel (Francesco Kröpfl and Marion Eppinger). Moreover, *The Music of Mauricio Kagel* by Björn Heile also proved to be of great aid to my work. Stefan Conradi, associate of Edition Peters who for many years worked together with Kagel, enriched my thesis with invaluable information.

After Kagel's death I became very close to his daughter, Pamela Kagel, from whom I have received immeasurable help during my work.

In my research into the reception of the four chosen works, I used, among other sources, the reviews that appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Le Monde* and *Opernwelt*.

The description of the 2006 Kagel-Festival in Buenos Aires was based, beyond the documentation held by the CETC (Centro Experimentación del Teatro Colón), on the reliable

recollections of its Argentine organiser, Diana Theocharidis. During the festival the Argentine filmmaker Gastón Solnicki made a 67-minute documentary, entitled *Süden*, which was exceptionally helpful in my research.

The Kagel legacy held in the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel shed much light on the development of the four works, from their very first manuscripts.

III. Methods

The starting point of writing my thesis was the information I gained during the special relationship I had with Kagel that lasted more than two decades. It proved to be of substantial help that from 2002 I sung in Argentina on several occasions, coming to know the Argentinian dialect of Spanish, and became closer to Kagel's native land. In many cases this personal experience and the long conversations, held with his still living contemporaries gradually revealed the secret of Kagel's uniqueness. In addition to *Unbedingt Musik* by Michael Gielen, and singing under him as conductor assisted me in performing Kagel's *Ein Brief* in Frankfurt and Lisbon. I also compared the information to be found in Christina Richter-Ibañez's *Mauricio Kagels Buenos Aires (1946-1957)* with my own interview material.

The basis of the vocal technical overview of his vocal works is my own performer's experience in modern music which has been part of my entire career. I have attempted to answer the numerous questions raised up by the four chosen works (*Mitternachtsstück*, *Ein Brief*, *Quodlibet*, *Der Turm zu Babel*) based on my own experience and Kagels personal instructions. I have relied on scores published by Peters when introducing the works.

IV. Results

Kagel declared on several occasions about his vocal works that, being well familiar with the possibilities of the human voice, he had never written vocal lines in his pieces that would hurt or impair a performer's singing voice. In the case of the four chosen pieces that were created after the 1980's, it is definitely true. However, when writing the thesis, I have systematically

examined Kagel's oeuvre starting from the earliest works from the 1950's during which it became clear for me that this statement must be disputed when it comes to the earlier works written for solo voice. The young composer, looking for his own voice, did not adhere to the golden rule formulated by himself. He relied on and used his valuable experience as vocal coach at the Teatro Colón only in his later vocal works.

Performing the works of Kagel is more than a singer's challenge, it requires acting. Minute descriptions and choreography of it are parts of the score. Even so, it must be stated that the composer's personal instructions are indispensable for performing the pieces. Kagel's opera scene minimized for a platform (*Ein Brief*) or a woman's shoulder bag and the handkerchief hidden in it and their important role in *Quodlibet* are unique, exciting challenges for a singer. Composer instructions listed in the thesis provide help to performing the pieces.

In order to understand Kagel's world it is of utmost importance to be familiar with the literary inspirations he received in Buenos Aires through his friendship with Witold Gombrowitz and Jorge Luis Borges, discussed in the thesis. Humor and absurd elements inherent in his works can be attributable to these influences of his youth. Studying the works of these authors can be most useful to interpreting Kagel's works authentically.

The description of the 2006 Buenos Aires Kagel Festival is credible due to the fact that I participated at the event as organizer and performer. It turned out during my interviews that Kagel's own narrations were full of contradictions after the festival. This was probably caused by his conflict-laden relation to his long-lost native land. In my thesis I attempt to evaluate the events in an objective manner and use the documents available in my own archive.

V. Documentation of activities related to the subject matter of the thesis

Below I provide a list of the most important concerts at which I performed works by Kagel.

October 1986, Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music, Budapest

Mauricio Kagel – Composer's Night

Kagel: Ein Brief

Állami Hangvereny Zenekar

Conductor: Mauricio Kagel

November 1988, Alte Oper, Frankfurt

Mauricio Kagel – Composer's Night

SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden

Kagel: Ein Brief

Conductor: Michael Gielen

May 1989, Foundation Gulbenkian, Lisboa

SWR Baden-Baden Freiburg Symphony Orchestra's Concert Evening

SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden

Kagel: Ein Brief

Conductor: Michael Gielen

February 2000, Dr Anton Philipszaal, the Hague

Mauricio Kagel – Composer's Night

Kagel: Quodlibet

Residentie Orkest

Conductor: Mauricio Kagel

August 2003, Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires

Mauricio Kagel – Composer's Night

Kagel : Ein Brief

Orquesta Filarmonica de Buenos Aires

Conductor: Alejo Perez

May 2005, Cité de la Musique, Paris

Mauricio Kagel – Composer's Night

Kagel: Mitternachtsstück

Ensemble Intercontemporain

Conductor: Olari Elts

August 2006, Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires

Kagel Festival

Kagel: Quodlibet

Orquesta Filarmonica de Buenos Aires

Conductor: Enrique Diemecke

August 2006, Villa Ocampo, Buenos Aires

Kagel Festival

Kagel: Der Turm zu Babel (Parts)

August 2009, Theater Konex, Buenos Aires

Kagel Konex Prize

Kagel: Der Turm zu Babel (stage version)

Directed by: Diana Theocharidis