

Transgressing the Wall. Mauricio Kagel and Decanonization of the musical performance

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Abstract: *The article discusses selected some musical concept by Mauricio Kagel (1931–2008), one of the most significant Argentinian composer. The analysis concerns two issues related to Kagel’s work. First of all, the composer’s approach to musical theatre as an artistic tool for demolishing a wall put in cultural tradition between a performer and a musical work – just like Berlin Wall which turned the politics paradigm in order to melt two political positions into one. Kagel’s negation of the structure’s coherence in traditional musical canon became the basis of his conceptualization which implies a collapse within the wall between the musical instrument and the performer. Aforementioned performer doesn’t remain in the passive role, but is engaged in the art with his whole body as authentic, vivid instrument. Secondly, this article concerns the actual threads of Kagel’s music, as he was interested in enclosing in his work contemporary social and political issues. As the context of the analyze the authors used the ideas of Paulo Freire (with his concept of the pedagogy of freedom) and Augusto Boal (with his concept of “Theater of the Oppressed”). Both these perspectives aim to present Kagel as multifaceted composer who through his avantgarde approach abolishes canons (walls) in contemporary music and at the same time points out the barriers and limitations of the global reality. Moreover, Kagel’s pieces built bridges between the South American and European musical paradigms.*

Key-words: *Kagel, instrumental theatre, Berlin Wall, avantgarde music, decanonization*

1. Introduction

In his work on the subject of Mauricio Kagel (1931–2008) Björn Heile notes that it is extremely difficult to capture the phenomenon of this multifaced author. One of

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the most prominent Argentinian composer, who grew out of the multicultural avant-garde Buenos Aires of the 1950s., an experimenter shaped by Bauhaus and Fluxus, as well as an avant-garde artist who combines not only composition techniques, but also different media, styles and poetics (Heile 2016, 6), not exclusively musical ones. Heile also draws attention to the fact that this hybridity of Kagel's creativity is inspired by his native origins, in which the immigrant's status has been permanently inscribed: in South America as a Jew, born from German and Russian refugees, trying to implant European music and modality of thinking there; in Europe – as a Latin American (Goldman 2012, 33; Heile 2016, 8).

In this article we aim to present only one of the many faces of this highly original artist. This will be first of all Kagel as inventor of a specific concept of instrumental theater, analyzed in the context of the reflection of two other characters. One of them is Paulo Freire, Brazilian pedagogical researcher, representative of radical emancipation pedagogy, and the second one is Augusto Boal, Brazilian director, playwright, theater activist, educator, as well as inventor of the idea of Theater of the Oppressed (TO). In this way, we want to understand Kagel's vision as a manifesto of his perception of the human individual, but also of social and political reality and their mutual difficult relationships. This is important to remember that both Kagel and Freire as well as Boal came from Argentina – previously Spanish colony – and Brasil – Portuguese colony – and this experience of colonization as the form of particular oppression from the part of West Europe was common to all of them. Both, Kagel and Boal were born in the same period (Boal in 1929, Kagel in 1928) and they shared opinions by Freire who was the couple of years elder.

Kager's first attempts in the instrumental theater genre (term used previously with reference to John Cage, where the performer's gesture has the same meaning as the value of the musical sound) take place between the 1960s. and 1970s. *Sur Scene* and *Sonant*, both pieces from 1960, can be considered as the examples of two opposite perspectives of Kagel's approach. These two perspectives Paul Craenen describes respectively as: "musical performance [...] presented from the outset as if it were a performance of music in a theatre play"; and "exposing the musical action as theatre" (Craenen 2014, 55). This latter can be explained as follows: "the theatrical aspect is the result of the playing techniques chosen, the playing situations and interactions between the performers, and Kagel's playing instructions, which do anything but facilitate playing, instead leading to a kind of sabotage of the music-making activity" (Craenen 2014, 55).

2. Kagel's approach to actual political events

Having lived in Germany since 1957, Kagel was not indifferent to the politics and his instrumental theater reflects equally the individual experiences of the human being as well as the collective experience of divided Europe. Beate Kutschke notes that the German avant-garde of the 1960s. was in general strongly associated with the opposition political movement, and Köln – the place of Kagel's emigration – although it was not the proper center of this avant-garde resistance movement, it was still influenced by the intellectual trends of the New Left (Kutschke 2015, 323–8). Arnold Whittall claims, on the other hand, that before the 1960s, Kagel was simply a believer in Marxism (Whittall 2003, 13). Composer never directly declared his political sympathies through the music, but researchers of his works point to explicit allusions and references to current events in Germany, and not only in Germany. And so, in *Hallelujah* of 1969, as Kutschke argues in another of her articles, Kagel supported student rebellions by criticizing the unreflective and blind ideology, on the example of the role of Catholic Church in the Third Reich (Kutschke 2010, 569–70). In the first version of his *Opus 1.991* he referred directly to the events of the fall of Berlin Wall. According to Heile (2016, 10): “the sketches show that *Kagel* also planned to include a reference to the *Mauerspechte* ('wall peckers') who slowly chiselled away the *Berlin wall* at the time of composition by having percussionists use hammer and chisel on stones”. However, Kagel gave up this idea, probably in order to avoid such direct imagery. In *...den 24.xii.1931* one can find references to repression of prison revolt in Argentina, Japanese army staying in China or the presence of German immigrants in Argentina. Kagel connected aforementioned events, described in the world press, to his 60th birthday, quoting literal excerpts from newspaper articles and setting them for baritone part.

3. Kagel's musical “anthropology”: an attempt to transgression beyond the wall

It would be a mistake, however, to perceive Kagel's work as a reporter's reaction, artistic commentary on particular political events. Kagel expressed opposition not so much against to the Soviet hegemony in Germany, but rather against to the Western European civilization, which he apparently perceived as oppressive, since in one of the interviews for Max Nyffeler (2000) he told as follows:

I am glad to have been born in Argentina, since I was not confronted with the notion of cultural hegemony, which in Europe has been used to justify fatal

inhibitions and aggressions. [...] As regards the concept of “cultural identity”: sure I’ve got one, my identity, yet I would prefer to speak of “fragmentary identities”. The aggressive identification with a single culture has often led to catastrophes (quoted after: Heile 2004, 57).

What was happening on the other side of the Berliner Wall was interesting for Kagel rather as one of many representations of geographical and cultural “otherness”, signified by specific instruments, tonality and musical coloristic – which, for example, *Osten* presents in the most canonical way: the first from the series of eight miniatures *Der Stücke der Windrose für Salonorchester (Pieces of the Windrose)*, written between 1988 and 1994 (see Heile 2004; Heile 2008, 292–5). In this composition Seth Brodsky perceives “classic Mahlerian conundrum of simultaneous sincerity and parody, homeliness and exile” (Brodsky 2017, 242). This reversed view of the world, regardless of whether we will call it or ironic either parodist, either perhaps a peculiar manifestation of carnivalization, Kagel already announces in the commentary put on the margins of his work: “for me [...] South is still synonymous not with heat, but cold: with Patagonia, the Tierra del Fuego and Antarctica. The North, on the other hand, is anything but cold: merciless sun and sharply etched shadows, sweltering humidity, desert landscape and barrenness” (quoted after: Bamberger 2009, 26).

Kagel, in this cycle, situates himself as if in the center of the world (which is probably Germany), from which in eight directions the spectrum of the world is horizontally spread. This spectrum covers all the continents, with their inspirations, snippets and excerpts of sounds, quotes and suggestions from Transcarpathia up to the South American Andes. One hardly could find a perspective which would be more transgressive, crossing the borders and universal.

4. Paulo Freire’s ideas as the first key to the interpretation of Kagel’s transgressiveness in the instrumental theater

The anti-colonial sense of the idea conveyed by Kagel in his *Der Stücke der Windrose* is also obvious reflection of the influence of Paulo Freire’s ideological impact on composer’s music. If we return to the idea of interpreting the transgressiveness of Kagel’s instrumental theater through the prism of Freire and Boal’s thought, the irony, as a central point of interest, gives way to the others qualities, such as (in the case of Freire) freedom, liberation (or, on the other hand, oppression), and dialogue.

Moreover, the very concept of Freire's opposition between authoritarianism and freedom is reflected in the very reality of the German musical avant-garde of Kagel's times. For example in Freire's *Pedagogy of Freedom* we can read as follows:

our authoritarian past [in Brazil – L.B, M.L.] is now being challenged by an ambiguous modernity, with the result that we oscillate between authoritarianism and boundless freedom. Between two types of tyranny: the tyranny of freedom and the tyranny of exacerbated authority. And sometimes, we experience the two simultaneously (Freire 2001, 83).

Treated as an interpretative key to history of European music, Freire's thesis can suggest us a significant opposition which the composers of the 60s. and 70s. of 20th century tended to: opposition between the tyranny of orthodox serialism (or the other highly formal composing techniques sketched by the Köln and Darmstadt avant-garde) and the tyranny of experimental music. Some researchers of Kagel's music indicate that many of his works, as well as theoretical declarations may be treated as an expression of opposition against this first (authoritarian, as Freire would say) system – integral serialism (see Cook 2018; Heile 2008, 289; Heile 2016, 30; Kagel 2000; Mikawa 2013, 276–7). As Heile says, a characteristic feature of Kagel's artistic approach is "certain critical distance, a skepticism toward the music produced and the role of compositional techniques involved", while his own techniques "are far removed from the positivist pseudo-scientism of some multiple serialists and bear faint traces of irony" (Heile 2008, 289). Thus Kagel would be probably close to Freire's opinion from his same work *Pedagogy of Freedom*: "freedom is a must, constant challenge. Genuine freedom, even rebellious freedom, in this context is never seen as a deterioration of order. [...] Out for respect for freedom I have always deliberately refused its distortion. Freedom is not the absence of limits" (Freire 2001, 86, 99).

The instrumental theater, which is kind of category of gestures, releasing both the musician and the object (instrument), breaking the oppressive convention of traditional musical performance, in which instrument used to serve as a kind of psychological barrier between the artist and his recipient, becomes typical "cultural action for freedom", according to Freire's notion, which "transforms itself into permanent cultural revolution [...]. Both cultural action for freedom and cultural revolution are an effort to negate the dominating culture culturally" (Freire 1985, 86, 90). The instrumental theater is therefore a critical dialogue, between performer, score and recipient: "cultural action for freedom is characterized by dialogue, and its preeminent purpose to conscientize the people" (Freire 1985, 85).

This breaking the canon of European musical performance (that is what we call decanonization here) is just such freedom with limits, because Kagel doesn't follow blindly Dada/Cageian way, with their anarchistic avant-garde, basing on the poetics of random elements (Laskewicz 2008, 10).

However, the most meaningful concept taken from Freire for Kagel was so-called pedagogy of the oppressed. Freire believed that only very few groups of people are free from the oppression which they meet by virtue of race, class, gender, religion, politics, nationalistic issues, age, appearance, physical or mental disabilities and many others. What is important, Freire was of the opinion that the pedagogy could be a means of developing humanity and eliminating, at least partially, the effects of aforementioned oppression, leading to something what he called "ontological vocation of mankind" (see Torres 1998, 438).

5. Augusto Boal's ideas as the second key to the interpretation of Kagel's transgressiveness in instrumental theater

On this basis, we can talk about the relationship between Kagel's instrumental theater and the work of another artist, Augusto Boal.

Boal put the examples of his dramatic performances (experiments) in the work entitled *Game for Actors and Non-Actors* (Boal 2005). These experiments, in which actors were spontaneously incarnating the roles of the oppressed and oppressors, very often took place in public and became open *quasi*-psychological sessions. As we know, Boal uses the notion of the "Theater of the Oppressed", but he uses it in a broad sense, especially when he talks about so-called "Poetics of the Oppressed". Boal comments on this phenomenon as follows:

In order to understand this *poetics of the oppressed* one must keep in mind its main objective: to change the people – "spectators", passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon – into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action. [...] The poetics of the oppressed focuses on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonist role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plan for change – in short, trains himself for real action. In this case, perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for revolution. The liberated spectator, as a whole person, launches into action. No matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that it is action! (Boal 2000, 122)

The passus in question requires to be interpreted. First of all, the main goal of Boal's theater is some kind of authentical change of the experience of reality. The action makes it possible by the virtue of its own value, only because this is the action. This specific switch from one state into another (from the state of closure to the state of liberty), which results from the spectacle, is the most important feature of poetics of the oppressed. Both action and acting are main values of such understood theater, and, what now is fictional can easily become real, if only the spectator will allow him/herself to be involved in common experience of the activity. Fictional (artistical) gesture has the status of preliminary to the real (Boal says about theater as a rehearsal before stepping into reality).

For Kagel this Boal's rule is important but in another sense. The task of the audience is to perceive the transformation of the performer's mentality. His/her relation with the musical instrument is extended to the theatrical gesture, and the instrument is no longer treated as the prolongation of performer's body. Kagel's aim was first of all to liberate the performer, not the audience. However, the audience becomes the witness of aforementioned liberation.

The thing of great matter is the notion of revolution in the background of Boal's concept. Transspectator (which means precisely: liberated spectator) is revolutionist as well as experimenter, and in both these roles risks the quitting his/her comfort zone. Revolution is important not only because of its connotations with left political and social option, but it presumes something abrupt and rapid. If we say that theater is the revolution, it means that theater is the breaking gesture, releasing the spectators and giving them freedom.

As the special examples of Boal's aesthetic applied to the instrumental theater one can point out firstly *Privat* and then *Ornithologica Multiplicata* (both from 1968). In the former of these works, which not necessary should be performed in public, Kagel tries to tame the listener with sounds which are very well known from the private (home) space, now subordinated to the rules of the performance and, due to this gesture, becoming the music. Through this operation, which is kind of ambient music, Kagel broke the inviolable canon of European auditory habits. Similar effect Kagel achieved in *Ornithologica Multiplicata* for caged birds, recorded and broadcasted live (see Castanet 1993, 23). But Pierre Albert Castanet, who gives these two particular examples from Kagel as the useful application of Boal's concept, doesn't put attention to the fact that in both cases spectator's action seems to be rather symbolical, limited merely to the symbolic gesture of the transgression. Is that really revolution – this in fact passive participation – or rather is that critical view about our own listening practice?

6. Practical implications of Kagel's instrumental theater

Boal treated the theater as the useful tool to combat the violence and social, religious, political, sexual inequalities. He even became the active politician, elected to the Brasil parliament. The question is, if instrumental theater can really become an equally active means of social policy? Perhaps the irony seems to be more appropriate category of reading Kagel's music. However, what is really interesting in Kagel's work is that he found very narrow way in the contemporary avant-garde, addicted to dogmatic and formal serialism, to fight this hegemonical ideology and autonomy of West culture. Music as the medium, much more absolute than theater, restricts such revolutionary gesture as in Boal's sense. This is the reason for Kagel music was not enough. In matter of the fact he was more observer of the reality then activist, but not passive observer (like Stockhausen). Still, he prepared the way for another, who were continuing his work of breaking the walls, like Vinko Globokar or Dieter Schnebel. His ideas are vivid also now in Darmstadt school. We can claim that this great musician's opus is still work in progress and the idea of transspectator will evolve in the avant-garde music in the very next future.

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