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## PANASONIC THEATRICAL ADVENTURE

### **Mauricio Kagel's *Acustica* for Experimental Sound Generators and Loudspeakers (I CD ZZT080403 - *Zig-Zag Territoires / Printemps des Arts de Monte Carlo, 2007*)**

During the two years preceding his death (December 2008), Kagel was collecting the fruits of his labours and completing his unfinished works. In his typical meticulous and accurate way, he directed most of his energy to organising and producing, before all, the live performances (such as those at festivals *Cut and Splice* in London in 2005 and *Printemps des Arts* in Monte Carlo in 2007) of his monumental complex project *Acustica* (1968–1970), and then to recording this work in two different versions for compact disk. After the first live performance in Cologne in January 1971, followed by the publication of an LP record, *Acustica* remained in the shadow of the other large projects of Kagel's instrumental theatre, thus its reestablishment on which the author insisted in the course of his final years, can today be interpreted as his last will.

*Acustica* is an open piece based upon two separate streams: one is composed of the electronic and instrumental material captured on a four-channel tape produced in Cologne in 1969 with segments whose sequence and activation point depend upon the person handling the tape recorder; the other sets an open score made of two hundred 'cards' listing – like stage directions in a theatrical script – accurate rules, instructions, notated sequences and diagrams, the proper selection of musical instruments, certain compulsory sound generation techniques and ways of communication among musicians, types of concert behaviour including facial expressions...<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the sequence of card usage and parameters, such as tempo and dynamics, are completely left to decisions and arrangements among three to five musicians. According to Kagel's notes, 'the initial impulse of this composition starts from the potential of creating the maximum possible homogeneity of two different sound categories... This connection should be established by a related treatment of instruments and electronically generated sound'.

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<sup>1</sup> 'First: the players never look at each other. Second: faces *à la* Buster Keaton are obligatory for all performers. Third: carefully avoid any extra movements. Fourth: play by heart.'

The fact that Kagel completely controlled his last authorial production, meaning he chose the musicians personally and together with them went through the elaborate process of rehearsals and preparations for the concert and recording, and that by making decisions on interventions on the recorded material he actually set the dramaturgy, alerting us to the authorised performances of *Acustica*, with an *a posteriori* message. Despite his familiar resistance to the set-in-stone, once and for all captured sound recordings of a piece, involving either electronic, serial music or *high fidelity* recordings, it seems as if, near the end of his life, the composer was trying to catch and freeze his utopian world of sounds, his *acoustics*, by offering two different versions of his work, also radically different from previous recordings.

Even though one notes the autonomy of dramaturgical flow and structures, which is unquestionable after a careful comparison of both versions having a similar duration (the first one is 3'05" longer), listening to the entire disk leaves the impression of a continuous flow, like two clips from an enormous sound reality, rather than two imprints of the same score. A remark implying that, for example, the first version is richer in amazing timbres, while the other favours the electronic sound, remains within the sphere of personal speculations and judgement of taste, and is contrary to the author's intentions aimed at the cohesion of two independent sound flows, the electronic one – seemingly fixed, and the other, instrumental one – seemingly free.

Kagel made his last production with members of the *Tam Theatre* ensemble from Krefeld, whose four young musicians<sup>2</sup> among whom there are no familiar names (such as Siegfried Palm, Vinko Globokar, Michel Portal or Theodor Ross) agreed to take a similar journey through *Exotica* in 1971. As an ethnomusicologist, instrument maker and sound demiurge, he once again brought to the light of day his impressive, eclectic selection of musical instruments, bridging epochs and virtually covering the sound of the world from its beginnings to this day; ranging from a wooden rhomb calling to the voice of ancestors and a comb, through a metal pan flute, a stick with threaded bicycle bells or linked and tuned castanets, to a saxophone with a child's balloon or a plastic toy trombone, a violin with steel spikes or megaphone... Constantly creating new labyrinths of domesticated electronic and denatured instrumental sounds, the musicians had an additional task – to intervene with their modified voices, according to the composer's marks. When listening to this fascinating production in which the air of authority of the composer and his cult work is still felt, one should not ignore the achievement of

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<sup>2</sup> Gereon Bründt, Björn Kiehne, Alfred Pollman, Pit There.

the performers who first had to travel a long journey through assimilating the text and context of *Acustica* while searching for a credible sound outcome with a ludic structure.

Since the effects of such a panasonic theatrical adventure require a visual dimension in order to be perceived in their full meaning, the question is why Kagel never opted for a video production that is readily available today?

Why did he practically give up his specific invention at the end of his life: the instrumental theatre or the music to be watched and listened to, which established him as an heir of Dadaist and Futuristic gestures, a contemporary of the theatre of the absurd with wandering tragicomic characters lost in a sound chaos, and running away from musical stereotypes? One should also not forget that, when reduced to a sound dimension, *Acustica* is left without specific humorous, sarcastic or ironic tones, which are latent in the stage performance.

And perhaps the reason for this is yet another last subversive and ironic provocation of Mauricio Kagel, convinced that *Acustica*, supported by musicians and a live avant-garde legacy, can carry on by itself, without him and visual support? Doesn't the author leave his work exclusively to the sound domain, having said so in the very title – 'for experimental sound generators and loudspeakers'?

Taking a view of the completed opus, one could say that *Acustica* is a genesis and nature of the sound and musical matter, a reflection on origin and meaning which go more into the concept of sound broadness rather than deepening it; it tries to include the infinite spaces of sound, to suggest the endless number of various objects and subjects that generate it, to emphasize its vitality, the possibility of continuous journey and transformation... In *Acustica*, Kagel also redefines the notion of an interpreter whom he places in an ambiguous position: he promotes him to a coauthor, leaving him a huge space for making his own decisions and improvisations, but only after Kagel first made him undertake to waive the established rules of the profession and musician's professionalism, starting from giving up his own instrument to accepting unusual, often comic and grotesque situations... For all that, down the concealed roads of artistic creation, this both utopian and futuristic work not only fails to reveal the secrets of musical being, but leaves open, if not deepening, the mystic and philosophical questions of creation... By theatricalizing the nature of music, Kagel musicalizes not only nature, but the entire subject world, demystifying it at the same time with carefully composed structures and fascinatingly rich texture.

The possible new versions of *Acustica* without Kagel will open up new experimental areas, while its future interpreters, by bringing the new, broadened sound experiences of their

own times, are likely to point to the changes of relations of the utopian and futuristic potentials of this open and anticipatory project. At all events, the last Kagel's discographic production will remain an unavoidable reference.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović