

An **Ashgate** Book

The Music of Mauricio Kagel

Björn Heile



THE MUSIC OF MAURICIO KAGEL

For my parents

The Music of Mauricio Kagel

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Introduction

In Search of Kagel

Writing a book on a composer such as Mauricio Kagel presents a particular challenge, not so much because it is the first book-length study of Kagel's music in English and the first in any language to concern all of Kagel's output to date, but primarily because Kagel's artistic personality remains so elusive. A title of the 'The Music of ...' variety raises the expectation that the oeuvre of the composer in question can somehow be summed up and described with a finite set of characteristics. As any responsible writer knows, such an attempt to contain the work of a creative mind within a sharply defined interpretative framework always involves a certain wilfulness; but, arguably, the problem is exacerbated in Kagel's case. For, which Kagel are we referring to? Kagel, the aspiring multi-artist, steeped in the Bauhaus-influenced cosmopolitan avant-garde of 1950s Buenos Aires? Kagel, the member of the European post-war avant-garde, who endeavoured to fuse integral serialism with aleatory technique and live-electronics? Kagel, the experimentalist, whose Fluxus-inspired creations questioned the limits not only of music and composition but of what can be considered art? Kagel, the maker of experimental theatre, film and multimedia works, for whom the term 'composition' is not necessarily connected to the acoustic domain? Kagel, the postmodernist, who recombines the discarded fragments of earlier music, be it 'classical', 'popular' or 'folkloristic', into new, multi-layered artworks? Or Kagel, the composer of deceptively simple pieces of concert music which seem to make a mockery of the conceptual complications and perspectival refractions so often associated with his work? Where can the 'true' Kagel be found? It is routinely said of composers that they are 'versatile' even when this is manifestly not the case, but there are few cases where 'versatility' can paradoxically be regarded as the primary characteristic. Any depiction of the composer which does some justice to Kagel's artistic persona must therefore embody more perspectives than Picasso's most advanced cubist portraits.

In fact, there are so many sides to Kagel that it seems mysterious how they can all be embodied in one person. But what relevance does its authorship have for the understanding of a work, or, to employ less emphatic language, a creative act? Why does it matter that pieces x and y have both been produced by z? In an age that has justly become suspicious of the idea of authorship as creation *ex nihilo* by a God-like genius, why write a composer monograph at all, with all the sub-Carlylean hero worship which seems to be inextricably bound up with the genre? One reason to continue with such an endeavour would simply be that there are a lot

of works to be discussed and that the context created almost by default by the works of the same artist is as good as any. Certainly it is my conviction that Kagel has created some of the most intriguing, perplexing and visionary, as well as some of the most beautiful and perhaps even 'greatest' pieces of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I also believe that these contributions have been insufficiently discussed and recognized in the English-speaking world (in contrast to, say, German-, Spanish- or French-speaking countries), and that this state of affairs needs to be addressed. But, perhaps even more importantly, I believe that works of art are not only created quasi-automatically by texts replicating themselves, or by anonymous social and cultural forces that are only insufficiently masked by the ultimately arbitrary signature of a human being – although I do not deny that these forces play important roles – but that they are the results of conscious decisions taken by sentient human beings, who do what they do for specific reasons, even if they would on occasion be hard-pressed to say what these reasons were. What we value in music is that it is imbued with human subjectivity, that it makes us feel that we are in touch with other human beings and their intellectual and emotional concerns. Put differently, what makes music meaningful is its communicative function, not its 'objective' structure (or only insofar as its structure can be understood to contain traces of subjectivity). In listening to music we construct imaginary personae whose subjective expression we detect in the music: there can be no expression without a subject to attach it to – however elusive that subject may be.¹ De Man (1971) has pointed out with regard to literature that authors transcend their own selves in artistic creation; similarly, the imaginary persona I spoke of should not be confused with the actual person of the composer (or the performer): as Cone (1974: 84) puts it, 'even if we decide that the subject experiencing "cheerful feelings on arrival in the country" is a character named Ludwig van Beethoven, this Beethoven is not the composer'. But nor are the two completely separate: part of the creative work undertaken by listeners is to negotiate between the subject positions offered by the music and their knowledge or assumptions concerning its creators. That, in a nutshell, is why we continue to be fascinated by accounts of composers, historical and present, and why composer monographs still matter.

This is not to reinstate the myth of artistic creation as the free expression of an autonomous, sovereign mind: there can be no doubt that subjectivity is contingent; yet that does not render it a less relevant topic. In any case, the above-mentioned multifariousness of Kagel's work makes the idea of authorship as direct expression of a unified, self-identical ego an impossibility. If, on the other hand, one allows for inherently plural, inclusive, fluid and perhaps even contradictory subjectivities, then Kagel's works appear as emphatically human documents. And in that sense, Kagel's case, however exceptional it may appear in many ways, is also symptomatic. For, if one regards composition as an expression of identity or identities, Kagel's negotiation of plural identities – be it his Argentine heritage, his adopted German environment, or his Jewish ancestry – becomes exemplary of the current socio-cultural situation of Western societies: after all, identities are no

longer pre-defined but have to be chosen; they can no longer claim exclusivity but have to be negotiated with conflicting, often contradictory, positions; and traditions and movements have lost their obligatory character. No composer of the late twentieth or early twenty-first centuries can claim to follow a specific tradition out of necessity, because he or she has been born at a specific place or taught by a particular predecessor. While the plural identities arising from Kagel's particular biography as a South-American immigrant to Europe, born to European, Jewish immigrants to South America, are unusual – if hardly exceptional in an age in which national, regional, ethnic and religious rootedness are more the exception than the rule – the challenge his work poses to monistic notions of identity or the positing of 'essences' and 'core identities' is significant for contemporary societies on a larger level. In other words, composition has lost its innocence: it is no longer possible to conceive of it as a craft which primarily consists of developing further a given style in order to create self-contained tonal structures. Instead, composing means to position oneself, accepting certain traditions and influences while rejecting others. Similarly, the notion of style refers to more than a characteristic way of combining notes: it signals identity. This situation is hardly new: that Schoenberg had to insist so ostentatiously on his inheritance of the Austro-German tradition, for instance, is arguably a reflection of his underlying insecurity. But as this example shows, more often than not the fiction of unitary identity is kept alive and composers keep on composing as they had before; it is only through the radical multiplicity of an oeuvre such as Kagel's that the problem of 'post-postmodernist' or late modernist subjectivity in music comes to the fore – that Kagel's work is so frequently regarded as trivial is an indication that its refusal of unified identity remains a *pièce de résistance*.

For these reasons it is important to resist the temptation to reduce the diversity of Kagel's output to the convenient and normative notion of 'underlying unity', as happens all too often.² Nevertheless, there are certain qualities that unite Kagel's works, from his experiments in group psychology, explorations of film, and compositions for light sources, pieces for lion roarer sextet (in *Phonophonie*) or musical saw quartet (in *Tremens*) to string quartets and orchestral pieces. One of the most fundamental of these qualities is what could be called 'composition as a means of intellectual inquiry': in his work, music is not so much conceived of as autonomous objective structure, but used to comment on society and culture. This may partly explain the stylistic diversity of Kagel's music, since style is employed less as an end in itself than a means to an end, and is valued for its signifying potential and the associations it raises, rather than for its putative purity (a term Kagel abhors). This does not imply that Kagel is inattentive towards structural cohesion and stylistic consistency. What it does imply, though, is that, in Kagel's case, style cannot be equated with authorial control and the 'personal voice' of the composer as is still customary; rather, Kagel's subjectivity becomes apparent from the way existing styles are employed and transformed – by what, appropriating terminology introduced by Bakhtin (1984; 1992), one might call 'stylization'. This is another instance of Kagel's interrogation of traditional notions of subjectivity –

yet it would be ultimately belittling to assume that Kagel's practices amounted to a *denial* of subjectivity.

The pragmatic notion of musical style implicit in the stylistic diversity of Kagel's music is mirrored by his versatility with regard to different media and art forms; the two most overt features of his work thus form two sides of the same coin. What is so specific about Kagel's art is that it is always *about something* or *reflects on something*. It is an art of commentary and of conceptual thinking, and these principles can be realized in a variety of art forms. This amounts to a radical re-conception of the notion of composition: for Kagel, composition is not necessarily connected with sound, since it is characterized by procedure rather than product – a way of doing something. Likewise, the focus lies more on the referential character of a composition – on how it relates to the world – than on how it is constituted in and of itself.

One result of these principles is a sense of aesthetic distance, which pervades Kagel's work, spanning as it does more than five decades and radically different stylistic periods. Since Kagel's compositions are emphatically not complete in themselves but refer to what lies outside, and compositional technique is a means to an end rather than an end in itself, Kagel's music tends to have the quality of indirect speech or of the conditional – it is music of the 'as if', meta-music. This holds true of Kagel's early serial compositions, which often sound as if he was mocking the technique he used himself, thus combining the exploration of integral serialism with its parody, just as of his most recent compositions, which appear like simulacra consisting largely of allusions to historical styles. This indirectness of musical annunciation is also behind Kagel's most celebrated contribution to the history of twentieth-century music, the 'instrumental theatre' which rests partly on the theatrical quality of any performance of music. If the activities of the performers are highlighted at the expense of the sonic result, it can become difficult to decide whether the players are simply musicians or actors who play musicians. As a result the performance becomes fictionalized, like diegetic music in film or stage music in the theatre. While the technical means to produce this element of theatricality is specific to some of Kagel's works, the principle of self-reflexivity and aesthetic distance on which it is based is a common thread in most of his output. Thus, without in any way wanting to deny or minimize the stylistic ruptures in Kagel's compositional development, the elements of continuity must not be overlooked. If these principles – the use of music as a means of intellectual inquiry, diversity of styles and media, and aesthetic distance – can or should be summed up, then in the insight that composition involves much more than combining notes. As will be seen, this formative experience can be traced back to Kagel's early years in Argentina. In fact, it can be argued that Kagel's recent work is most indebted to the aesthetic currents of 1950s Buenos Aires, notably to his teacher Jorge Luis Borges.

In the following, then, I want to chart Kagel's compositional career, discussing continuities and discontinuities alike. While earlier explorations of his work have tended to focus on individual works in isolation (Schnebel 1970, Klüppelholz

1981, and Klüppelholz 1991b), the time seems now right for a greater appreciation of the larger connections between works and of the oeuvre as a whole. Wherever this is possible in the limited space available, his work will also be related to the larger developments in composition as well as culture and society more generally. For, as has already been noted, while Kagel is in some ways an unusual figure, in others his career reflects the larger trajectories in late twentieth and early twenty-first century composition, and his work cannot be understood in isolation from that of others, such as Juan Carlos Paz, Pierre Boulez, John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Dieter Schnebel or György Ligeti. Thus, this book also offers something like a case study in the music of the last decades.

The structure of the book is a synthesis of, or compromise between, a traditional monograph with entries on compositions in chronological order and a series of critical essays on different aspects of Kagel's work. While all of Kagel's known compositions are mentioned, they are discussed in relation to specific contexts. Thus, the book can be read from cover to cover as a critical and analytical approach to Kagel's compositions, or used as a handbook in which entries on individual pieces can be looked up. Needless to say, allowances have to be made for either perspective. While the chapters each concern different topics, they do tend to relate to specific periods of Kagel's oeuvre and are arranged chronologically, although they frequently overlap – chapters three and four run almost in parallel in terms of chronology. Within the individual chapters, pieces are usually discussed in chronological sequence. The book is addressed to fellow musicologists and practical musicians as well as to scholars in neighbouring fields and readers with a special interest in contemporary music and the arts. While some specialized terminology is unavoidable, I have tried to restrict myself to the discourse common among the humanities and have refrained from specialized analytical techniques. Thus, out of a sense of obligation as well as personal inclination – not to mention methodological concerns – the book is more an exercise in hermeneutic criticism than in formal analysis. Although my main focus are usually scores and performances of the works in question, reference will also be made to the sketch and manuscript materials, which are housed in the Mauricio Kagel Collection of the Paul Sacher Foundation (Basel, Switzerland). Supplementary materials, such as newspaper reviews, also part of the Mauricio Kagel Collection, have likewise been consulted.

Finally, the task of this book cannot be to sum up Kagel, homogenize the heterogeneous, unify the incommensurable, finalize the unfinalizable. The search I have described at the beginning of this introduction can never be complete. While there is no one *right* way to interpret Kagel, one approach that is guaranteed to be *wrong* is to assume that there is one unitary correct understanding of his work. Nevertheless, the task of the musicologist does not end with stating the so-called 'facts'; hence, explanations will be offered, connections charted, conclusions drawn, interpretations and analyses proposed as well as contested. In this way, the book does not try to end debate but to enable it, and its success will ultimately depend on whether it motivates readers and other scholars to formulate alternative

viewpoints which complement or even contradict those proposed here. After all, it is to such an idea of pluralist, if impassioned and vigorous, discourse that Kagel's own work is so profoundly committed.

Chapter 1

Buenos Aires

The story of Kagel's birth could be taken from one of his own pieces: born on Christmas Eve (1931) in a Catholic hospital, the nurse insisted that the new-born child be christened Jesus. However, the mother was quick enough to avert the situation by promising that she would do so with her next son – she was in fact Jewish. Thus the child received the religiously neutral name Mauricio Raúl, and the mother never had to renege on her promise because he was her fourth and last child. Both parents had fled anti-semitic persecution in post-revolutionary Russia about nine years earlier, but only met in Argentina (Klüppelholz 2001: 226).¹ The family name, meanwhile, derives from a village near Berlin from where one of Kagel's grandparents hailed (Klüppelholz 1991c: 16). The polyglot nature of his parents' household is particularly poignantly revealed in an anecdote of Kagel's according to which his grandmother had the habit of talking back in Russian and Yiddish to the Spanish-speaking radio moderator. This cosmopolitanism was later to become one of Kagel's most notable features, leaving a mark not least in his vocal compositions which frequently mix several languages, both real and imaginary.

The importance of Kagel's Jewish background in particular has only recently become a topic of discussion (Klüppelholz 2001: 13–31, Reich 2001). Buenos Aires had and still has one of the largest Jewish communities of the diaspora, and so Kagel saw Shakespeare in Yiddish before experiencing his work in Spanish or English (Nyffeler 2000: no page).² Moreover, he met his future wife, Ursula Burghardt, a visual artist from a German Jewish family, in a holiday camp organized by a teacher from the German Pestalozzi School for Argentine and German Jewish children.³ As has not been previously known, Kagel also wrote an article on the importance of preserving and fostering a distinctly Jewish music for the paper of a Zionist organization as late as in 1955 when he was already compositionally involved with the international avant-garde (Kagel 1955).⁴

Kagel's father was a printer, and his prodigious inventiveness must have led to modest wealth enabling the young Mauricio to take instrumental lessons, first in piano, and later also in clarinet, cello and organ. Some years after this, music literally saved his life: having diagnosed TB, the family doctor 'prescribed' singing lessons (Klüppelholz 2001: 249). These not only cured the thirteen-year-old, but also instilled in him a lifelong fascination with the voice. The thriving immigrant culture in Buenos Aires brought Kagel into contact with some of the best music tutors imaginable. His first piano teacher was from St Petersburg, soon to be

succeeded by Vincenzo Scaramuzza, the teacher of Martha Argerich and Bruno Leonardo Gelber, and a direct descendant of Liszt's school (Klüppelholz 2001: 237). It was Scaramuzza who lent Kagel a score of Schoenberg's First Chamber Symphony, music the Italian pianist did not personally approve of, but which he must have sensed would be of interest to his far too inquisitive pupil. Additionally, Kagel studied theory with Erwin Leuchter, a pupil of Anton Webern, and conducting with Theodor Fuchs who also introduced him to the *Real - Lexikon der Musikinstrumente* by his own teacher Curt Sachs (Sachs 1913), a book which made a tremendous impression on Kagel (Klüppelholz 1991c: 41). Given this pedigree, Kagel's later remark that he was 'educated by inadequate teachers to become an autodidact' (Kagel 1975: 7) is somewhat astonishing.

As these examples show, Buenos Aires in the 1940s and '50s was far from the musical backwater one might imagine it to be. On the contrary, the Teatro Colón had long established a reputation as the leading opera house in Latin America and one of the finest companies in the world (Béhague 1979: 105–10), and the Argentine National Symphony Orchestra could rival that of many European countries. The influx of refugees from Europe helped to transform Buenos Aires into one of the most vibrant cities in the world as far as its musical life was concerned. The Teatro Colón, for instance, was led by Fritz Busch from 1933 to 1936 and Erich Kleiber from 1936 to 1949, and practically all major soloists and conductors regularly performed in the city. Additionally, there were many private organizations led by members of the upper classes so that, according to Kagel, one could choose between six or seven classical concerts a day (Klüppelholz 2001: 228). Apart from classical music, Kagel also revelled in Argentina's rich indigenous music, the tangos and malambos, as well as in the various immigrants' musics – not least among them Yiddish klezmer which Kagel celebrated in his 'Osten for Salon Orchestra' more than thirty years later.

Like Verdi before him, Kagel failed the auditions to the local conservatoire. Plans to study with one of the greatest of autodidacts, Arnold Schoenberg, also came to nothing, since, apart from the financial constraints of the Kagel household, Schoenberg had already quit teaching and died soon afterwards (Klüppelholz 1991c: 46). Nevertheless, Kagel received a thorough grounding in musicianship and composition. Of decisive importance in this respect was his involvement with the *Agrupación Nueva Música* from 1947, which was often conducted by his teacher Theodor Fuchs, and for whom he later worked as pianist and artistic adviser (the group's other pianist was Michael Gielen who would go on to become one of the most distinguished interpreters of new music and who still acts as an important propagator of Kagel's work). The group also performed some of Kagel's early works (Reich 2001: 1). The *Agrupación's* founder was Juan Carlos Paz, a charismatic composer whose influence on Kagel can hardly be overestimated, although a rupture between the two meant that Kagel never credited Paz after his departure from Argentina (Rebstock, forthcoming). Although Kagel took only very few formal lessons with Paz as he found him less inspiring in one-to-one tuition than in his informal advice,⁵ Paz's aesthetic beliefs formed the backbone of the

Agrupación and were therefore instrumental in shaping Kagel's compositional development. Paz is a unique figure in Latin-American music in that he fervently rejected nationalism, which reigned supreme in the musical life of practically all Latin-American countries, and instead advocated the most advanced compositional styles and techniques. The programme policy of the Agrupación, together with that of its more conservative and nationalist 'rival', the Grupo Renovación, present a picture of advanced contemporary music in Buenos Aires as diverse as that of any European or North-American city of the time. Whereas the Grupo favoured broadly speaking neo-classicist composers such as Stravinsky, Milhaud, Hindemith, Copland, and de Falla, the Agrupación supported avant-garde figures such as Schoenberg, Webern, Cowell, Varèse, and, by the late 1940s, Cage and Messiaen (Béhague 1979: 272). Paz had adopted twelve-note technique as early as 1934 – a revolutionary position as far as Latin America was concerned (Béhague 1979: 273) – and moved on to more experimental techniques in the 1950s. He also wrote several books, the most influential of which is *Introducción a la música de nuestro tiempo* (Paz, 1955), which demonstrates his profound insights into practically all then current trends, as well as expressing his messianic passion for the avant-garde and disdain for nationalism. There can be little doubt that Kagel profited greatly from the involvement with Paz's circle and his unique connections; a review by Kagel on a performance of one of Paz's works is almost hagiographic (Kagel 1953a). An article from 1953 on Dallapiccola's *Canti di prigionia* shows the twenty-one-year-old composer to be not only well aware of Dallapiccola's work but also that of his younger compatriots Bruno Maderna and Luigi Nono, who were only then beginning to make an impact (curiously, though, he calls them dodecaphonic, being apparently unaware of integral serialism, which is consistent with Kagel's own music of the time which is also dodecaphonic but not integrally serial). He also mentions *musique concrète* which was then still in its infancy (Kagel 1953b). There can be no doubt that he owes this knowledge to Paz (if possibly indirectly). His peers, such as Francisco Kröpfl (the director of the Agrupación Nueva Música from 1956), Gerardo Gandini, Mario Davidovsky, and (from a younger generation) Mariano Etkin and Horacio Vaggione – all sadly undervalued in Europe – also testify to the creative potency of Argentine music from the period, in which the Agrupación played a crucial part.

The cosmopolitanism and modernism of the Agrupación Nueva Música and to an extent the Grupo Renovación present a somewhat partial picture of the state of contemporary music in the Buenos Aires of the 1940s and '50s, however. 'Official' musical life was dominated by 'folkloristic nationalism', as typified by the most influential Argentine composer of the time, Alberto Ginastera (Béhague 1979: 212–20). Ginastera, too, however, fell foul of the regime of Juan Perón, who governed the country from 1946 to 1955 – if on account of his political convictions, not his aesthetic persuasion.

Although the regime was unable to formulate a coherent cultural policy, Perón's autocratic rule had a paralyzing effect on Argentina's arts scene – lavish support for work that was deemed propagandistically useful notwithstanding.

There is no question of the contempt in which Kagel as well as his family and associates held the regime. Given such an oppressive ideology, the revolutionary nature of the Agrupación and the single-minded determination of Paz can hardly be overestimated. In this context, Kagel's persistent opposition to nationalist aesthetics and fervent embrace of cosmopolitanism may be an even clearer indication of Paz's influence than his adoption of dodecaphony.

On Fuchs's recommendation (Reich 2001: 1), Kagel also gained a foothold in the more established musical life by becoming *maestro interno*, that is rehearsal pianist and assistant conductor, at the Teatro Colón in 1956, after having earlier worked freelance at the Chamber Opera of Buenos Aires, where he took part in productions of Britten's *The Little Sweep* and some of Milhaud's chamber operas (Klüppelholz 2001: 289). Through this work, Kagel gained more inside knowledge of the workings of an opera house and hands-on experience in practical musicianship than most composers of his generation can lay claim to. This would be of vital importance for his later career, particularly as regards his more experimental works, although or rather *because* they tend to resist convention.

Apart from his musical studies, Kagel read literature and philosophy at the university, also developing a penchant for anthropology and religious studies. He even had plans to graduate with a dissertation on Spinoza and Kierkegaard (Klüppelholz 2001: 30), but his developing musical career put an end to these. This slightly unusual route for a budding composer may lie at the heart of Kagel's uncommon approach to music which emphasizes the meaning and communicative function of music and its role in society even more than the music's structural make-up. His versatility, use of diverse media, and the wealth of extra-musical contexts in his work may also be related to his university education. One of the most decisive influences in this regard was his English lecturer at the private

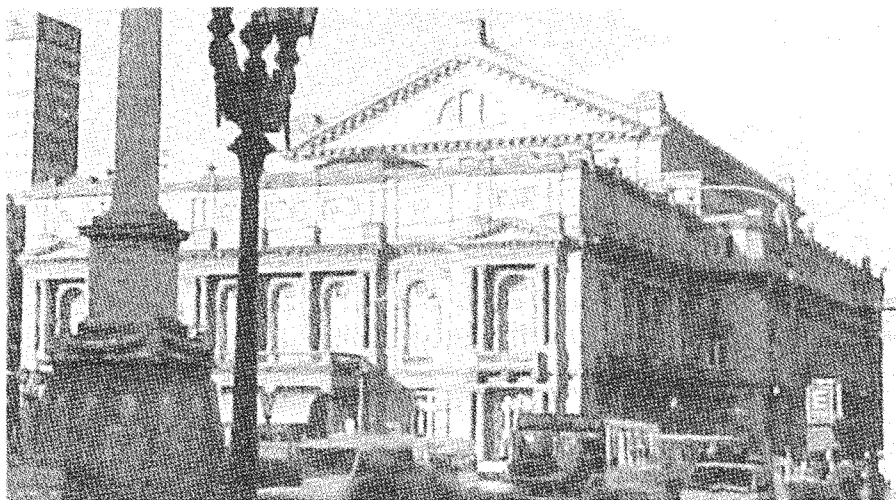


Figure 1.1: The Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires

Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores: Jorge Luis Borges, one of the greatest South-American writers, and also part-Jewish.⁶ One does not have to look long and hard to detect Borges's influence in Kagel's work in his preoccupations with labyrinths, encyclopaedias, cabbalistic concepts and techniques, and the idea of parallel realities governed by strange rules (Heile 2001b, Allende-Blin 1991). In this context, the association with surrealism which has become a commonplace in Kagel criticism reveals a Eurocentric perspective: the parallels with Borges as well as what has become known as South-American 'magical realism' (whose founding father, Alejo Carpentier, Kagel has also acquainted) are far more notable.⁷ Influenced by the formidable Victoria Ocampo and her acclaimed journal *Sur*, Borges also became a figurehead for the cosmopolitan ideas of the Argentine intelligentsia of the time, which were also embraced by Paz and the Agrupación Nueva Música (Rebstock, forthcoming). Borges formulated perhaps the most brilliant attack on (literary) nationalism: in his programmatically titled essay 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition' Borges argues that it is limiting and nonsensical to treat only Argentine themes in one's work as the nationalists argued, since 'either being Argentine is an inescapable act of fate – and in that case we shall be so in all events – or being Argentine is a mere affectation, a mask' (Borges 1970: 219). The article culminates in the call that 'we should feel that our patrimony is the universe' (ibid.), a sentiment which resonates in a lot of Kagel's works as well as his comments, and which Klüppelholz (2001: 28), for one, tentatively connects to a particularly Jewish sensibility (although this belief was shared by non-Jewish artists).

Borges also fostered another distinctive feature of Kagel's creative personality, his use of visual media, by employing him as photography and film editor of his journal *nueva visión*. Kagel's passion for film and other visual arts goes back further though. Having grown up right next to one of Latin America's premier film studios (SADE), the young Mauricio pestered staff long enough to be permitted entrance to observe the work and finally to work as an extra (Klüppelholz 2001: 168ff.). There he appeared alongside one of the principal actresses, who was picked up after work in a conspicuous limousine: Eva Duarte, later to be known as Ev(it)a Perón. During the shortages of WWII and its aftermath Kagel was also involved in restoring films which were destined for destruction for gaining raw material for the chemical industry. The films thus rescued were to act as the stock of the Cinemateca Argentina of which Kagel became a member. He also claims to have been the first to synchronize René Clair's *Entr'acte* with Satie's music for the film (Kagel 1982; Reich 2001: 4). In 1954 he wrote the music to Alejandro Sanderman's *Muertes de Buenos Aires* on Borges's poem of the same title (now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York); the film was duly banned by the censors for showing people scavenging for food on a landfill (that Borges was a dissident may also have played a role; Kagel 1982; Reich 2001, 4; Klüppelholz 2001: 179f.). Shortly after that, Kagel himself directed another film which featured empty buildings; this was accompanied by 'acoustical loops' from a chamber ensemble, thus introducing the deliberate non-synchronicity which would become a hallmark

of his later films. Kagel's interest in visual and mixed media can also be traced to the decisive influence the Bauhaus had in Buenos Aires at the time, after several influential artists had emigrated there, including the photographer Grete Stern, whom Kagel knew well (Klüppelholz 2001: 178f.; Rebstock, forthcoming).

Besides Borges, Kagel was also introduced to another great writer then living in Argentina, the Polish novelist Witold Gombrowicz, who found himself in Argentina at the outbreak of the war and thought it best to stay. Kagel (in Klüppelholz 2001: 276) and Allende-Blin (1991) paint amusing portraits of Gombrowicz. A Rabelaisian character renowned for his irreverence and bitter sarcasm, he was the exact antipode to the cultured, bookish and monkish Borges. According to Allende-Blin, the near-blind Borges seemed never to have been young, whereas Gombrowicz refused to grow up (a dominant theme of his own writings); he acted every bit the badly behaved aristocrat. In order to have a chat with him, Kagel had to challenge him for a game of chess in the smoky atmosphere of the Café Rex, since playing chess was about the only thing Gombrowicz did apart from writing. Kagel's scepticism towards lofty ideas and bourgeois high culture, his contempt for concert hall rituals, his sarcasm and surreal wit as well as his capacity for scandal owe a great deal to the Polish polemicist.

Literature was to remain one of Kagel's greatest loves; in conversation and in his essays he comes across as unusually well-read. This erudition finds its way into his compositions in all imaginable ways except for the most conventional: text-setting, which Kagel avoids precisely because of his reverence for literature. As a well-read intellectual he is no exception among composers, but he has never allowed his intellectual insights to solidify into the ideological or aesthetic dogmatism which continues to blight the musical scene in his adopted country. Rather than assuming the messianic tone of the manifesto, Kagel's writings are more akin to the Borgesian mould of essay-writing in that they draw on a multitude of sources and make all sorts of surprising and often witty connections between art forms, disciplines, cultures and periods.

Many of Kagel's early works have been lost since his departure to Germany in 1957. Since he planned to stay only a year, he did not take all of his compositions with him. Little did he know that he was only to return home twice and for brief periods.⁸ The exceptions are his Variations for mixed quartet and the first version of what was to become his String Sextet (often referred to in its Spanish title *Sexteto de cuerdas*). Therefore, the little that is known about the other works is mostly due to his own accounts.⁹ Like most composers, Kagel began writing music as a child (Klüppelholz 2001: 34f.), but his acknowledged compositions begin with *Palimpsestos*, a setting of Federico Garcia Lorca's *Poeta en Nueva York* for mixed choir *a capella* from 1950, when he was eighteen years old and already working for the Agrupación Nueva Música. The choice of a poet who was murdered by the nationalists in the Spanish civil war may be seen to contain a political message in Perón's Argentina, notwithstanding the aesthetic force of Lorca's verse. This political subtext is consistent with Kagel's later article on Dallapiccola (see above) in which he describes Dallapiccola working under 'political and artistic oppression

and discrimination...in those miserable years that preceded the second world war' (Kagel 1953b: 61), an unequivocal statement in a country that aspired to the very conditions which are thus criticized. The title of the piece derives from Kagel's practice of superimposing different variants of the poem which were printed in the appendix of the edition he used (Klüppelholz 2001: 33). In this way, he was exploring experimental techniques of text-setting even at such an early stage. As Schnebel (1970: 9) points out, Kagel also stretched out many syllables, thus favouring the sonic dimension of the text while obscuring its semantic aspect, a process arguably already begun in Lorca's poetry itself. *Palimpsestos* was followed by *Two Pieces for Orchestra and Variations for mixed quartet* (flute, clarinet, violin and violoncello, 1952 – rev. 1991, with variable instrumentation). According to Schnebel (1970: 9), the *Variations* are Kagel's first twelve-note composition. The lack of technical experience can be felt in the somewhat didactic exposition of the series as an unaccompanied solo line at the beginning and the predominating horizontal unfolding of the series in mostly polyphonic textures. Furthermore, the prevalence of semitones in the series itself, insufficiently masked by frequent leaps in major sevenths and minor ninths and the somewhat rudimentary row transformations betray that the *Variations* are an early work (see example 1.1). Nevertheless, the wide variety of textures and expressive characters as well as the flexible rhythmic structures belie the age of the composer. Serialism, including attempts to extend it to other parameters, notably rhythm, is further developed in what is usually considered the first version of Kagel's *String Sextet* (1953). This title, to be found in all literature on Kagel, seems to go back to the composer himself and is justified inasmuch as the *String Sextet* from 1957, revised when the composer was already resident in Germany, is indeed based on the earlier piece. However, the manuscripts show unmistakably that the original version was not a string sextet at all but scored for flute, clarinet, bass clarinet and string trio, thus being closely related to the earlier *Variations*. Until the recent European premiere of the *Variations* the *Sextet* was practically the only completed work from Kagel's Argentine period to have been performed in Europe, thus becoming part of his established catalogue (therefore the piece will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter).

Example 1.1: Variations for mixed quartet, bars 1–7 '

Tema
Andantino (♩ = ca. 69)

Cl or B
(or SSa Vla)

VI

pp p mp mf p pp < mp

pp p mp mf mp p pp f

mf pp p mp mp