

There Will Always Be Questions Enough

Mauricio Kagel in conversation with Max Nyffeler

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Mr. Kagel, at the moment you're probably deluged with interviews). In what you've composed, you have constantly made human behaviour and communication situations the subject of your works, Can we soon expect to get a piece of yours called "Interview"?*

I already composed the piece back in 1994; it's called "Interview avec D. pour Monsieur Croche et Orchestre". In it, I selected and interwove some of Debussy's conversations from his "Monsieur Croche antidilettante" writings. That interested me a lot, because Debussy too was very sceptical about interviews. A composer's communication with the outside world is surely aural rather than oral. In "Interview avec D.", it's the orchestra that is the interviewer, and much of it sounds as if the orchestra were posing the questions, and Debussy giving the answers. And what splendid, instructive answers they are!

"My interviewers have often ascribed surprising things to me that I was astonished to read. These interviews demand a great effort on my part and – alas! – are unprofitable both for me and my visitor. I want to sing my inner landscape as frankly as possible. No doubt, this grammar of art doesn't operate without setbacks. I can foresee them, and they please me. I won't do anything so as to create adversaries for myself. But neither will I do anything so as to convert enmities into friendships. One must strive to be an artist for oneself, and not for others. In fact, the day when I don't provoke quarrels any more – one has to hope it will be as far away as possible – I shall reproach myself bitterly. My latest works will of necessity be dominated by the detestable hypocrisy which will have permitted me to please everyone."

Why are you basically sceptical about interviews?

A lot of trust is needed to talk about oneself seriously, and one can't just produce this trust at the drop of a hat. If one wants to go into the reason for things, then one needs time, and even more than that: one needs to forget that time is steadily ticking by. In almost every conversation there are natural barriers to overcome. For instance, Stravinsky's interviews with Robert Craft are interesting because Craft managed to get Stravinsky to enhance serious insights yet further with his wonderful sense of humour. And it really doesn't matter that the conversations were edited afterwards. To publish the original statements without editing is a sin, because the written word calls for a concentration of discursive that isn't at all necessary when one is talking. Trust can probably only arise when one meets often, and the conversation is intellectually stimulating for both partners. And of course, fairness comes into it too.

Well, the conditions for our conversation are a little more modest than that. We can probably fulfill the last two, but we haven't exactly met often in the past. – Mr. Kagel, I would like to ask you a bit about your past. I'm interested in how you came to Germany. That was nearly half a century ago now – you've been living in Cologne since September 1957. How was it for you at the time: was it a cultural break, or more like a fresh encounter with things you actually knew already from Argentina?

I got to know Pierre Boulez in 1954 in Buenos Aires; he was there twice, on tour with Jean-Louis Barrault's theatre company. He insisted: "You have to leave: for Europe." I applied for a stipendium to go to France, but I didn't get it. But I did get one from the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst. Boulez told me about the WDR's Electronic Music Studio. So I came to Cologne. Of course I was familiar with many things, but not others. In Argentina my curiosity was seldom left unsatisfied: I was regarded there as a European, and here as a South American. That's a paradox that I'm very fond of these days, because of its peculiarity. Actually I feel a little foreign everywhere – not fundamentally, but enough to talk about "latent alienation". And that creates a beneficial distance from some things. I was born in Buenos Aires, but it could just as well have been Chicago, Shanghai or Milan. Emigrants often travel, not to where they want to go, but where they can get a visa to go. The geography of chance is tolerable but unfathomable.

I am Argentinian by birth, but in no way a typical citizen of that country. Or perhaps I am? One of those millions of North and South Americans who come from European immigrant families. But the identification of emigrants and their offspring with their new home can often be much stronger than that of the "indigenous" population. Cultural osmoses that arise from mixtures always seem much more interesting to me.

You are dealing there with exactly the question I wanted to put to you: the one of so-called cultural identity. It's a very problematic concept, because these days cultures that are closed to the outside world, and clearly defined in their content and lines of tradition, are becoming ever less common.

I am lucky to have been born in Argentina, because I was not confronted with the notion of cultural hegemony that was the justification in Europe for fatal hindrances and aggression. That was one of the realizations that first shocked me here. As someone coming from overseas, I thought: What do my colleagues know, and what are all the things that, thanks to an enlightened music scene, what are all things they know that I don't? And then I found out that Ravel, for example, was almost completely unknown, they had only a vague idea of Reger, and perhaps they had heard a couple of piano preludes by Scriabin. I encountered one-sided, impoverished knowledge of music, and this anemic situation went on for a long time, because the avant-garde kept its ancestral gallery small out of ignorance, and was afraid of being contaminated. It's a complicated subject. But to believe that one can write something new by denying what has already been created is not only wrong, but also leads to superfluous pieces with no self-sufficiency or historical relevance. As for the notion of "cultural identity": yes, certainly I have one, my identity, but I would rather talk in terms of "fragmentary identities". Aggressive identification with a single culture has often led to catastrophes. As far as chauvinism and nationalism are concerned, that's something I'm very sensitive about. Probably it's only unhappy people who have identity problems; that applies also and in particular to whole peoples and nations. The worldwide catastrophes we witness often have to do with the systematic destruction of identity. Murder and killing become something in their own right, and don't even bring any visible gains for the victor.

You were talking previously about the situation when you came here. At the time, you were obviously disappointed that the people here had rather narrow horizons. Was that bound up with a specifically German post-war situation, and the situation of the avant-garde of the day that only pursued a very narrow line of tradition and was blind to everything else? Or did that strike you as typical of Europe as a whole?

Both. On the one hand, Darmstadt was an attempt to retrieve what had been withheld during the "Thousand-year Reich". But the really young composers back then had only experienced the tip of Nazism. On the one hand there was a necessary, rapid gathering of information. On the other hand, there's the so-called cultivation (!) of the specifically German, specifically English, specifically Italian. That was then usually given an appallingly provincial tinge, frequently even a narrowly regional one. Years ago I was at the festival in Aix-en-Provence. The director of the Conservatoire there had virtually banned all non-French contemporary music. Can you imagine that today? That's how he aimed to make a good impression at the Ministry of Culture. There are many such examples of voluntary castration in nationalist views of culture.

In your view, is that what has happened in Germany?

No, there's an immense difference. In contrast to many European countries, the culture here is dominated by a tradition of tolerance and receptivity to things foreign. That was already so at the beginning of the 20th century; one only has to think of all the Russians who were in Germany, and of the Eastern Europeans as a whole who lived here, were performed, and worked as artists. The East always played an important role in Germany. West Germany was really amputated in this respect. Now we are going through a difficult transition, whose final restoration of normality we – or rather I - won't see. But then the gain for both sides, for both conjoined Germanies and the Eastern states, will be extraordinary.

Let's stay with the East. Your ancestors come from Eastern Europe. Were they Eastern European Jewish emigrants?

They were a mixture of German and Eastern Jews. Part of my family came from Prussia, and the rest from St. Petersburg and Odessa. But there was also a Sephardic branch in the family. Sephardic and Ashkenazy Jews don't often mix, but with me that is actually the case. In Hebrew,

Ashkenaz originally referred to Jews living in what are now Germany and North-East France, and Sefarad to the Iberian peninsula and southern France. So my ancestors also came from Spain, and that's why I feel happy to have been born in South America. Because I could not only read the Spanish literary classics in Spanish, but I can also understand Ladino, the Yiddish of the Sephardic Jews – an archaic Spanish language from the 16th century which is still spoken today around the Mediterranean.

When did your predecessors come to Argentina? Was it your parents?

Yes, my parents. That was in the second half of the twenties.

Did Eastern European culture play a part for you when you were growing up in Argentina?

An enormous role. When klezmer music became popular a few years ago, I just couldn't believe it. For me that was a very remote but not forgotten world that I knew well, and that rose up again from its acoustic submersion.

You had got to know it in Argentina?

Of course. For me, these Jewish players and their music had disappeared forever with the holocaust. But suddenly this klezmer music from New York appeared in Europe, played by young musicians who must have first heard it as children, at weddings. This music was rarely played in restaurants or theatres; it was pure wedding music, saturated with unruly, melancholy joy. And frequently the performers were not professional musicians, but gifted amateurs, because one couldn't live on one or two weekend weddings. That's rather similar to jazz in New Orleans, which started out as amateur music, relatively easy to play, and with a strict, clear code. When I came across klezmer music again about two decades ago, it was a matter of rehearing melodies, and re-experiencing moods that I would never have thought could be recalled.

Were there many Jews living in Buenos Aires?

Back then it was the biggest Jewish community after New York. The intellectual climate there in the forties and fifties was unbelievably dense, just as complex as it was contradictory – a really fantastic city, bubbling over with culture. I'll tell you something interesting. A few months ago, at the Marché aux puces in Paris, I stumbled on a little stall overflowing with Stars of David, Jewish amulets, cheap relics and junk. Suddenly I saw a theatre poster from 1942, announcing a performance by Maurice Schwarz in Buenos Aires. Schwarz was probably the most famous Yiddish actor in New York, and every year he and his troupe made a winter tour in South America, while it was summer in the North. The company appeared at the Teatro Excelsior in Calle Corrientes, which is where my parents sometimes took me. There, for example, I heard Shakespeare in Yiddish before I read him in Spanish or English. For me, this re-encounter with the poster for Maurice Schwarz reawakened near-forgotten experiences. Actually, I don't follow Yiddish or Jewish culture – one needs to make a clear distinction between them – but an important part of my roots lies there. Not to mention the many Polish and Russian theatre producers from Warsaw and Moscow who came from a Yiddish cultural milieu, and made essential contributions to the non-Jewish culture of their countries.

Wasn't it a strange feeling for you to come to Germany in 1957, twelve years after the end of the war, fully aware of your Jewish origins?

Certainly, yes. I've already had a lot to say about that elsewhere, and I don't want to repeat myself here. I'll just say this: I came here with the clear precept that one can't live in hate. What happened in Germany is so inconceivable that I made up my mind I would find people able to represent a completely opposite set of values. The products of culture are probably the only ones that have outlasted the historical doom of National Socialism, thus shedding an even worse light on it. One must not forget. What happened must not happen again – not even in milder variants. Yet the causes of hate are always present.

In many of your works, especially from the first two decades, I sense that you have a certain outsider's perspective on the culture here, which you were finding your way into back then. Did you feel then that you were at the margin? And is that still so, or do you feel fully integrated now?

I've certainly stayed a marginal figure, though I became a member of the "surveillance committee" fairly early on. I can actually live pretty well with this, because I'm allowed to work in peace – except when I have to give strings of interviews... And also, I've never sought a position of power in the music business. I became a teacher not so as to found a Kagel School, but to transmit knowledge. My work as a composer should be the only yardstick by which my contribution can be measured.

I believe that the idea of fashion also plays a prominent role in the world of culture. During the years I have been resident in Europe, I have been able to observe several fashions, with half-lives of varying brevity; that's especially true of the situation in Germany. I tried to pursue my own (by no means predetermined) path, without distraction. In the music scene there is a bizarre yearning for cult figures and leaders that always reminds me a bit of the infamous Führer principle. When I went to Darmstadt for the first time, in 1958, every one was talking about the Young Generation, and "Leaders of the Avant-garde". That made my stomach turn in every possible direction. The very conjunction of terms was remarkable. O.K.: it was an advertising slogan. But since I had stayed politically aware, naturally that concerned me.

And it presupposes such unequivocalty: someone who knows which way things will go. That contradicts your aesthetic; you're more the kind of person who seeks ambiguity, and perhaps that is one of the reasons why many of your pieces arouse controversy. Do you agree with that?

I have to admit to being astonished at how undialectically many intellectuals since the sixties have defended the advantages of dialectics. They read Adorno, admired his verbal virtuosity and the sharpness of his mind. But they found composers who really achieve aesthetic resistance with the aid of this dialectic harder to accept. But this has scarcely anything to do with the actual music. In the world of music, there are also verbal icons, and they simply lead to self-deception. Some political concepts were gobbled up completely uncritically. Some of the subjects of my pieces are certainly two- or even three-sided. I am interested in ambiguity. Though not because I am a fan of ambiguity, but because it is an essential feature of the external world.

Many of your compositions, especially from the early years, are marked by the interaction of music, speech, gesture and image, which gives rise to this glittering semantics. It seems to me that what, in those days, formed an indivisible unity entitled "Instrumental Theatre" has become increasingly separated-out during roughly the last ten years. That is, that on the one hand you deliberately make films or write stage works, and on the other, you compose so-called absolute music. Is that a correct observation?

In a certain sense, yes. But even during the period of instrumental theatre, I never stopped writing absolute music. Anyway, one could spend a lot of time talking about the concept of "absolute music". What is absolute music, and what isn't? I sometimes find absolute music exceptionally communicative, and I have the feeling I can tell what intimate anecdotes (including unutterable ones) the composer is relating. For example, in shaping melodies, one often talks about male and female elements. Anyone who can deal with that is able to formulate conflicts in a very varied, intimate way. Like Mozart, who puts male and female elements in the same melody as conflicting factors. So that too is part of the broad concept of absolute music... As for me, I've been writing pieces about the syntax of music for over twenty years. These elements of musical syntax have something to do with absolute music, as well as something I would call "absolute theatre". Dramaturgy is just as quantifiable.

Concerning the "Etudes" for large orchestra composed in the nineties, you have written: "The result is a piece of absolute music in the purest sense of the word." At the centre of your interest here are purely musical categories such as syntax, timbre or harmony, which are what the title "Etudes" actually refers to. Or in the orchestra work "Opus 1.991", which you describe in Hegelian style as a work of abstract subjectivity, it's the question of overtones, of formants, that concerns you. These really are genuine musical questionings. But from what you were saying, one can assume that you are not just thinking there in "absolute" dimensions. Beneath the surface of so-called absolute music, you are presumably telling your own "secret" stories.

Self-evidently, this kind of composing is based on the formation of a musical language. Every composer wants to communicate through music. I don't believe anyone who claims to write absolute music to the exclusion of all else, and isn't interested in whether people listen or not. Actually, one doesn't compose for a particular, ideal audience, but rather for a listener who is the same as the person who invented the music. It is a dialogue with oneself. And this dialogue needs syntactic elements, so that it remains comprehensible. This is part of my preoccupation with the concept of clarity. If people think I am just in search of something unclear, allusive, that's a misunderstanding. Admittedly, I have a bit of a weakness for anarchic situations that can be conveyed artistically and musically. And chaos interested me long before chaos theory became fashionable. But I am neither an anarchist nor a "chaoticist", and I am very strict and disciplined in my thinking. The elements I have named are concerned with aspects of musical language that are quite essential to me. Ultimately, that's what legitimizes my existence as a composer. I don't just write for myself, but I turn to others, by trying to make myself musically comprehensible with my own means. It's what one calls communicative trading.

With whom can a composer communicate these days, and how?

I once defined the overall situation as follows. Today, there are three categories of musical composition. First, music written to get an immediate response from the public. Second, music which is tailor-made for particular interpreters and instruments. And third, a contemporary abnormality that didn't exist before: music by composers for composers. With the latter, the listener is really left standing at the door: he can't get an entry ticket, so to speak. I am far from condemning this music, but it creates a completely new situation.

Self-referential composition, which has to do with the celebrated ivory tower.

In the course of the past twenty years, the ivory tower has acquired some pretty audible gaps. Perhaps this is something to do with world organisations' prohibition on killing elephants so as to trade in ivory. Well and good. In music there are sometimes similar states of affairs. What was admissible up to a certain point in time gradually can't be done any more; musical means that were once regarded as legitimate lose their credentials. Montaigne used the remoteness of the tower to reflect on the many unclear facets of the self. And Hölderlin found his ultimate verbal images in the tower. Reflection on the role of music in the many levels which constitute our society must not stop. Where clarity is the point at issue, nothing is clear. There will always be questions enough.

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