

Contempo - Interplay

CAGE

Created in 1940, John Cage's *Living Room Music* is the earliest work on the program and prefigures some of the sorts of developments that the other composers on the program would bring to their own music theater projects. It was during the late 1930s and early 1940s that Cage first began collaborating with dancers and developing his interest in non-conventional instruments and other methods of sound production. These practices would continue to define much of Cage's work of the following decades as he established himself as a seminal and even iconoclastic figure of the post-war avant-garde. *Living Room Music* constitutes an early example of an expanded conception of what musical performance could be: the work is to be performed on objects "of everyday use" and Cage instructs the performers to use various household items or architectural elements—those that one might find in a living room—as instruments: magazines, cardboard, "largish books", the floor, window frames, and so forth. *Living Room Music* is in four movements: "To Begin", "Story", "Melody", and "End". The first and the last movements are essentially percussion pieces for these household objects-cum-instruments. In the second movement the performers temporarily relinquish their "instruments" and become a speaking ensemble. Here their material consists of spoken and sung fragments of Gertrude Stein's short poem "The World Is Round": "Once upon a time the world was round / and you could go on it around and around". This repetition and rhyme, typical of Stein's poetry, lends itself to the sorts of de- and re-composition

that Cage demonstrates in this movement. The third movement is optional and includes a melody played by one of the performers on “any suitable instrument” (in this case, a more conventional instrument is needed to perform the melody).

STOCKHAUSEN

Along with Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen is the other towering—and controversial—figure of the post-war avant-garde included on this evening’s program. He was among the first to explore electronic music, aleatory (chance) and serial composition, and musical spatialization. His works could be immense (such as his 29-hour cycle of seven operas, *Licht*) but also intimate, as is the case with *Harlekin*. As with many of the “instrumental theater” pieces that he would compose in the 1970s and 80s, Stockhausen’s *Harlekin* was written for a specific performer, in this case, American-born clarinetist Suzanne Stephens. The piece is named after Harlequin, the polychromatically-clad trickster from the *commedia dell’arte*, a centuries-old comedic improv tradition originating in Italy. Stockhausen’s *Harlekin* consists of seven sections performed without breaks and each “movement” captures or represents in some way an aspect of Harlequin’s character: “The Dream Messenger”, “The Playful Constructor”, “The Enamored Lyric”, “The Pedantic Teacher”, “The Roguish Joker”, “The Passionate Dancer” (further subdivided into two sections, “Dialog with a Foot” and “Harlequin’s Dance”) and finally, “The Exalted Spinning Spirit”.

In performances, Stephens would dance while playing but the composer allows for the piece to be performed without this degree of bodily movement, in which case the notated dance rhythms in the score are to be played on a tabla, a Kandy drum (a Sri Lankan instrument), or any similar sounding drum. *Harlekin* may also be performed by a clarinetist at the side of the stage while a separate dancer performs the choreography. This type of flexibility in performance also became a feature in post-war music theater projects as composers frequently had to strike compromises between their desire for strict control over all aspects of the performance of their work and the realities and necessities of adapting to changing conditions, performers, and venues.

KAGEL

The varied output including multi-media, film, music, and theater of Mauricio Kagel represents some of the most significant contributions to the development of the “new” music-theater of the post-war decades. Born in Argentina but residing most of his life in Germany, Kagel remains to this day a somewhat lesser-known figure in North America. In Europe, however, he is seen as one of the most influential exponents of “instrumental theater” in which the actions of musical performers becomes an integral part of the overall aesthetic conception of the work and its realization. In considering possible comparisons and inspirations for Kagel's important early theatre work *Sur Scène* (1959/60), however, we would be better to look to post-war theater, particularly the plays of Eugène Ionesco or the later plays of Samuel Beckett. In *Sur Scène* [“on stage”], a

speaker comes on stage and begins what at first appears to be a lecture on new music, such as one might expect from one of its major exponents like Pierre Boulez or Stockhausen, both of whom wrote and lectured extensively on aesthetics and composition. The lecture is initially full of familiar and even cliché academic phrases and music criticism jargon that seem to circle around the theme of the “crisis” of contemporary music without ever truly identifying concrete issues and solutions. As it begins, “The crisis which today has befallen the musical situation must be viewed, for the time being, as an ultimate consequence of alienation and selfhood, (to the audience) in which musicians, (short pause) after all we cannot, with this never-ending talk about a crisis, lay bare all the problematic constituents of its problematic essence and simply bypass them...” Kagel specifies loudness, pitch, and tempo changes for the passages of speech which themselves eventually become fragmented and rearranged. The lecture never fully coalesces and the audience is instead left with a sort of meta-musical experience: a discontinuous discourse on music without any “actual” music. As Kagel permutes these parameters of performance and the individual textual passages, the lecture becomes increasingly erratic and decomposed. The “lecture on new music” is ultimately revealed as genre unto its own but in this case (as Kagel probably felt about many such lectures of the time) a genre without content representing an institution—“new music”—without any clearly agreed-upon or defined role in the contemporary world. The result is both humorous but also highly critical of the ways in which contemporary music is defined, communicated, and understood both by its audiences and by its practitioners.

DAVIES

Peter Maxwell Davies' *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1968–69) is probably the best known and most widely performed piece in this program and has become a representative work of post-war music theater. As with Stockhausen's *Harlekin*, Davies wrote *Eight Songs* for a specific performer, in this case, the South African-born singer, Roy Hart. Hart traveled to England following the Second World War with a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and later became a disciple of the German singing instructor Alfred Wolfsohn. Wolfsohn had himself fled to London from Berlin in 1939 where he became among the first to systematically organize and teach what became known as extended voice—essentially alternative singing and vocal techniques that extend beyond conventional singing techniques and styles.

The premiere of *Eight Songs* with Hart and the Pierrot Players at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London on April 22, 1969 in many ways marked a turning point for Davies and for British contemporary music, which had something of a conservative reputation compared to the activities of the then current generation of American and continental composers. The source material of *Eight Songs* consists of eight eighteenth-century melodies—several of them familiar to this day—that were played by a mechanical organ owned by King George III and later by the historian and antiquarian Sir Steven Runciman. It was supposedly with this small and delicate instrument that George III, during his periods of insanity, attempted to teach caged bullfinches to sing. The highly inventive score combines and transforms this historical source material with a

range of other styles which are at times highly expressionistic and even grotesque. The incredible and unconventional vocal abilities of Hart provided a perfect medium for conveying the psychological deterioration of the British monarch. Yet despite the ease with which the subject matter and its dramatic and musical treatment might turn to dark comedy or mockery, Davies portrayal of the monarch is ultimately somewhat sympathetic, highlighting the his loneliness and isolation. Davies thereby compels the audience to contemplate the potentially fluid boundaries between the oftentimes oversimplified categories of sanity and insanity. This fluidity in turn serves to remind the audience of the mental and social constructs through which we tend to partition music and theater and the ways in which all of the pieces on tonight's program challenge these preconceptions.

- Trent Leipert