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THE DRAMA OF TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESSES IN

MAURICIO KAGEL’S SOLO PIANO WORKS

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INTERTWINING MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM: THE DRAMA OF TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESSES IN MAURICIO KAGEL’S SOLO PIANO WORKS

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The Argentine-born composer Mauricio Kagel (b. 1931) is one of the most distinctive and multi-faceted European composers of the contemporary music world. A staunch skeptic of accepted musical aesthetics, traditions, and values, his works incorporate relentless imagination, explosive drama, disjunction, eccentric humor, and fractured rhetoric. Kagel’s solo piano works span the composer’s mature career and aesthetically follow his compositional development. The four selected piano works explored in this thesis (Metapiece [Mimetics], An Tasten, À Deux Mains, and Passé Composé) are at first contextualized within the composer’s other output. This overview forms Part I.

In the first chapter, a discussion of some important works from the two periods follows a brief biography. Within this survey Kagel’s compositional approach will be described as containing both modernist and postmodernist inclinations, ideas originating from musicologists Paul Attinello and Björn Heile. The next chapter focuses on the concepts of modernism and postmodernism first within a general cultural perspective, then secondly as they pertain to music. The point of this chapter is to establish for the reader an appropriate viewpoint for the analysis that follows.
Each of the four chapters in Part II focuses on one piano piece. First, implied meanings and expectations of the titles are analyzed; these titles have important connections to the activity in the music as well as dramatic and formal expectations. Second, the central dramatic idea behind each piece is elucidated and then supported through analysis. Much of Kagel’s music relies on a constant transformation of “musical figures” (which are constructed from single notes, chords, rhythmic motives, or any combination thereof); thus, analysis centers around transformational processes. Third, the conclusion of each chapter assesses the dramatic implications of the titles through the previous analyses, establishing how Kagel interweaves postmodernist tendencies with modernist techniques.

The final chapter will organize and review the broader points made throughout this thesis. One hopeful goal of this thesis is to help illuminate how listeners can engage Kagel’s work with a sense of playfulness, especially when confronted with the irony of enclosing within single works notions of modernism and postmodernism.
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INTRODUCTION

The Argentine-born composer Mauricio Kagel (b. 1931) is one of the most distinctive and multi-faceted European composers of the contemporary music world. He has produced significant mixed-genre works in musical theatre, film, and radioplay; he has also contributed symphonic, instrumental, vocal, and electronic music. A staunch skeptic of accepted musical aesthetics, traditions, and values, his works incorporate relentless imagination, explosive drama, disjunction, eccentric humor, and fractured rhetoric. Instrumentation in Kagel’s compositions can be quite unusual, at times incorporating traditional, non-traditional, and/or invented instruments. Yet in many of Kagel’s works, an unmistakable influence of traditional romanticism can be easily observed, albeit in a translucent or filtered fashion.

Although all of these qualities suggest that a formulation of representative works and any accompanying inclinations might prove difficult, it is possible to view Kagel’s work as falling roughly into two broad and widely overlapping time periods, each of which can be discerned from the other by investigating important general and specific differences in his approach to compositional issues. These differences also reflect a shifting stylistic emphasis between the originality of Kagel’s imagination and whatever milieu of ideas is circulating in Western avant-garde culture at a given time. This is not to say, of course, that the trajectory of Kagel’s work has been predictable; certainly the
opposite is true. But it is tremendously helpful to organize this often enigmatic repertoire, even if the results are a bit idealistic or arbitrary.

Because Kagel’s solo piano works span the composer’s mature career and aesthetically follow the transition from the early period to the later one, this writer believes it would be appropriate to place the piano works within the context of the composer’s other output. This overview forms Part I. In the first chapter, a discussion of some important works from the two periods follows a brief biography. Within this survey Kagel’s compositional approach will be described as containing both modernist and postmodernist inclinations. The next chapter will focus on the concepts of modernism and postmodernism first within a general cultural perspective, then secondly as they pertain to music. The point of this chapter is to establish for the reader an appropriate viewpoint for the analysis that follows.

Part II consists of the bulk of the thesis, an analysis of Kagel’s solo piano works. The goal of the analysis is to explore four solo piano works in detail: *Metapiece* (*Mimetics* [1961]), *An Tasten* (*Klavieretüde* [1977]), *Passé Composé* (*KlavieRhapsodie* [1992-93]), and *À Deux Mains* (*Impromptu für Klavier* [1995]). The first piece reflects Kagel’s earlier preoccupations with open forms and indeterminacy, dramatic irony, and the playful manipulation of listener expectations. The latter three pieces fall into his later style and demonstrate his return to the triad as well as genre subtitles borrowed from nineteenth-century idioms.

Each chapter in Part II will proceed in a similar way. First, implied meanings and expectations of the titles will be explored, which have important connections to the activity in the music as well as dramatic and formal expectations. If a piece has a genre
subtitle (such as Passé Composé [KlavieRhapsodie]), some representative pieces from
the past will be investigated (e.g., Liszt’s Hungarian Rhapsodies), exploring the
expectations of that genre based on this history. If Kagel conceives theater and music on
a continuum, these pieces would be placed more or less closest to the musical side.
However, these pieces do incorporate the drama of theatre: In each piece the dramatic
element, suggested by the title, is realized almost exclusively through musical means.
(Kagel’s other solo piano work to date, MM 51 (Ein Stück Filmmusik für Klavier [1976],
which contains more overt theatrical gestures, will not be covered in this thesis.)

Secondly, the central dramatic idea behind each piece will be elucidated and then
supported through analysis. Much of Kagel’s music relies on a constant transformation of
“musical figures”¹ (which are constructed from single notes, chords, rhythmic motives, or
any combination thereof); thus, the analysis will center around transformational
processes. These processes, in a modernist sense, function as the musical equivalents of
traditional, functional harmony; they articulate formal expectations and the dramatic
shape. The various musical figures, which act to unify the formal sections and give the
listener something to grasp, are transformed and fragmented almost to the brink of non-
recognition, but they always retain some level of identifiability. On the other hand,

¹Kagel discussed an inclination towards musical “figures” in a forum at the 5th Acustica International in
Cologne:

Yes, I'm interested in musical figures, because in music, no realistic art can be
created without them, and for me this is the Alpha and Omega in enabling the
listener to come to grips with music. This identification and re-identification,
and understanding how these figures relate to other figures, allows the listener
to complete a musical architecture in his own mind. Without it, the music seems
to be going nowhere, and he gets bored—passively so, because he can't gain access
to it. Since music can be absolute in abstracto (sic), it needs this link to reality.

Mauricio Kagel, from a talk given at the 5th Acustica International in Cologne, translated by Richard Toop.
musical figures are also transformed into other types, recognizable as related but distinct as separate sound-objects. Other features to be discussed include rhythm, harmony, registral placement, dynamics, phrasing, and theatrical gesture, all of which undergo transformation to some extent.

Third, the conclusion of each chapter will assess the dramatic implications of the titles through the analyses just given, establishing how Kagel interweaves postmodernist tendencies (e.g., the use of the connotative power of the triad) with modernist techniques (e.g., ensurance of unity through formal articulation), resulting in a synthesized narrative structure that reflects and/or expands upon the expectations of the titles.

The final chapter will organize and review the broader points made throughout this thesis and will address the limited reception of Kagel’s work in English-speaking countries, which may be due in part to an impediment to finding the proper frame of mind in which to experience this wonderful music. One hopeful goal of this thesis is to help eliminate this impediment and illuminate how listeners can engage Kagel’s work with a sense of playfulness, especially when confronted with the irony of enclosing within single works notions of modernism and postmodernism.

This is a substantial repertoire (it lasts about as long as the entire Schoenberg repertoire for solo piano) that has been unjustly neglected, especially since experiencing this music is extraordinarily fascinating for all the reasons addressed in this paper. There is very little scholarly inquiry regarding Kagel’s recent works, let alone the piano works, which contributes to my belief that exploring these works and Kagel’s approach is a necessity.
PART I

OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT
CHAPTER 1
KAGEL, POST-WAR POSITIONS, AND RECENT REFORMULATIONS

Biography

Mauricio Kagel was born in Buenos Aires on December 24, 1931 and as a child studied music extensively, taking private lessons in piano, organ, and cello in addition to theory and conducting with prominent local teachers. Kagel, however, is a self-taught composer; he began writing and experimenting with ideas in 1950. In his college days he studied philosophy and literature at the University of Buenos Aires. During this time and after he also became interested in pursuing positions in cinema and photography, revealing a penchant for deeply exploring many artistic fields.

After his first musical posts in Argentina as a conductor, chorus director, and rehearsal accompanist, Kagel eventually settled in Cologne, Germany. He participated in the Darmstadt summer courses, first as a student in the late 1950s and later as a lecturer in the 1960s and ‘70s. Kagel became director of the Cologne courses in new music after Stockhausen and attained a professorship at the Cologne Musikhochschule in 1974, where he continues to teach. Since his arrival in Germany, Kagel has remained multi-disciplined, holding prominent positions in film, theatre, and contemporary music institutions, mostly in Germany. He has always exerted considerable control over his staggeringly enormous creative output, producing his own films and radioplays, and
conducting many of his large-scale works. Also a tireless essayist, Kagel has written much about his philosophy of music and his own compositions in the form of books, articles, liner notes, program notes, and interviews. Recently, Kagel has traveled more to the United States and Canada, where he is finally seeing some celebration of his music outside the European continent. He has won many significant prizes and has witnessed the recording of a good deal of his music (often with the composer himself participating either as a conductor or one of the performers) in a multi-volume series on the Disques Montaigne label. At present, Kagel remains active in many capacities and is continuing to compose in his usual prolific manner.

**Important Works 1953 to ca. 1970: Deconstructing Systems**

Kagel’s initial composition of maturity was the *Sexteto de cuerdas* (1953, rev. 1957). Kagel displays in this piece, and in other works from around this time, an immediate fondness for establishing rigorous controls (through his own brand of serialist technique) while at the same time undermining this system with seemingly random interpolations and ludicrous requirements of precise execution. Highly contrapuntal and expressionist, the work employs the serialist techniques and relationships between elements in vogue at the time; these techniques are infused with the purpose of rational design. However, much on the musical surface (tempo fluctuations, incorporation of quarter-tones, unspecified pitches with specified rhythms, performer-chosen dynamic shapes) seems to deny a flatly scientific or mathematical explanation and gives rise to the
intuitive or improvised gesture, which is the polar opposite of the goals implicit in the domain of serialism.

A roguish spirit can be detected at work here that cannot take the ideological aims of an ultra-structuralist aesthetic (“high modernism”), which predominated at this time in the West, too seriously. In this respect Kagel’s composition serves also as political discourse, wherein disruptions of the formal elements constitute an insinuated critique of the dominant post-war aesthetic of order, control, and hierarchy based in specialized principles of “scientific” discipline.2

A subversive critique of current musical trends is even more apparent in Transición II (1958-59). Here, however, it is not the severe discipline of determinacy that is under question but the use of chance compositional procedures and performer-choice, introduced to the avant-garde community by John Cage and developed in Stockhausen’s aleatory pieces, a pertinent example being Klavierstück XI. Kagel’s piece is written for piano, percussionist (limited to playing on the body and insides of the piano), and two electronic tapes. The score begins with a section of explicit instructions for the construction of the taped music as well as directions for performance. The score itself is a mechanical and visual wonder; it requires the musicians to explore the many possibilities of individual interpretation: It consists of highly detailed musical fragments interspersed with subjective graphic symbols; these components are printed on rotatable circular cards with movable slides and pages that can be reordered.

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2A detailed explanation of the influence of high modernism in industry, architecture, and music after World War II is in Alistair Williams, New Music and the Claims of Modernity (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1997), 45-6.
A composer with firm ideological intentions might be trying in this work to provide musicians with a unique opportunity: the “co-creation” of a performance that would be recognizably different from other interpretations, perhaps proving the flexibility and efficacy of the younger composers’ aleatory procedures. But does a performance of this work endure such hopes? Some listeners heard an ironic, observant (but emotionally distant), and somewhat humorous presentation instead:

. . . in performance the work could hardly fail to seem an absurd spectacle in which two musicians, operating on a piano, undertake meticulous actions in the service of musical aims which remain obscure, and in that respect the piece—as much as [Kagel’s] *Anagrama*—presents itself as a caricature of contemporary avant-garde endeavor.³

It is also probable that most listeners would never be able to distinguish one interpretation from another, which may reveal something about the limits of one’s ability in differentiating related complex structures. Kagel scholar Paul Attinello remarks:

A difficult question arises about this piece, more than it does with any of Kagel’s early work: Is this a joke? Is this piece a parody, or was it meant seriously?—or are there blended levels of irony that makes answering this question impossible? . . . A different problem is that one recording . . . suggests that the piece is merely a rather arid expanse of pointillism for various parts of a piano. In fact, there seems to be no way that the complex processes of decoding, interpreting, and choosing notational passages can be perceived by any listener, as the different virtuoso notations and concepts all sound basically the same. Is the piece, perhaps, suggesting something about the impossibility of communication between a composer, performers, and an audience?⁴

Thus, Kagel’s work can be seen not merely as another extreme example of the aesthetic climate in which it is found, but also, because of the scope of its extremity and


irony, as a piece about the aesthetic climate. It equally participates in and contradicts its own devices, questioning values it engages with fervor. As Kagel’s compositional creativity extended itself into other mediums and began to incorporate aspects of drama, these “objectified” positions became more and more pronounced, producing in the later works increasingly absurd musical circumstances.

One such piece is *Sur Scène*, which is one of the first examples of “instrumental theatre.” Finished in 1960, its brazenly theatrical character can be detected from the personnel and equipment required: a bespectacled, black-suited speaker, a mime in black tights with makeup, a black-suited bass singer, and three instrumentalists, each of which must play various keyboard instruments (piano, celesta, harpsichord, and organ-positive) in addition to a battery of percussion. Electro-acoustic equipment is also required for the playback of specific tape-recordings (available by rental only) during the performance. The performance consists of the speaker in a central acting role, giving a ridiculously nonsensical speech on what seems to be musicological musings on the present state of music, as the other five figures fill a generally accompanying role. In addition to playing and/or singing the written music, the four musicians are also required to act. Kagel gives specific directions to them (such as looking around at other people, moving about the stage and audience at various speeds, gesticulating in ludicrous ways) that combine with the speaker and mime’s actions into an extended chaotic parody complete with physical comedy. It is supposed to last about forty minutes.

It can be said that the absurdity of *Sur Scène* certainly pokes fun at musical practices of the day, but it focuses especially upon those of the more elite avant-garde culture. This culture encompasses not just composers and their methods, but also the
periphery of academic criticism, musicological thought, and contemporary performance practice—all of which is parodied by Kagel rather forcefully in this seminal work. At the same time, Kagel was establishing himself as a composer who was interested in combining musical performance with dramatic action in an original way. It is important to note that a piece like Sur scène uses drama to upset the convention of standard performance reception: The audience is not so much listening to a piece of music in the traditional sense, but is rather forced into the position of experiencing how musical culture operates through a piece of music created within that culture. Thus, the piece could be considered “meta-music” due to the many levels on which it functions ontologically.5

Kagel continued his trajectory of intensifying the overturning of conventions in perhaps his most infamous large-scale work, Staatstheater (1967-70). Here Kagel goes far beyond disrupting the relatively marginal avant-garde culture (as he did in Sur Scène); he instead broadens the horizon by turning one of the most revered (and mainstream) institutions of Western culture, the opera genre, completely on its head.

The monumental Staatstheater (the score is 470 pages, split into nine module sets) could be considered an operatic work, but the sheer amount of subversion and ludicrous deconstruction lead one to consider this work “anti-opera.”6 Kagel took the entire traditional culture of an opera house—ballet dancers, vocal soloists, instrumental players, chorus, costumes and scenery—and turned it upside down: The chorus engages

5Another example of dramatic “meta-music” is Match (1964), a rivalry between two cellists that is mediated by a percussionist. The cello parts are difficult to the point of absurdity; the work dramatically and humorously demonstrates a sometimes neurotic side of musical culture: virtuosic competition.

6Ligeti spoke of writing an anti-opera in 1971, but Kagel rose to the occasion. See Griffiths, 171-2, 181.
in overlapping solos, the soloists sing in impossible ensembles, ballet dancers do
calisthenic exercises while the instrumentalists dance, scenes contain not music but noise.

What Kagel accomplished was to take one of the most complex artistic worlds
and without any compromise whatsoever shatter its constituent activities and re-assemble
them into something never seen before. The effect is to disseminate meanings and
inverted interactions without concern for a certain aesthetic reaction,\textsuperscript{7} be it negative,
positive, or indifferent. There is no discernible hierarchical form, no narrative to which to
respond, no climax or denouement, and certainly there is no “theme” that can be related.
There are just conglomerations of intricate cultural and musical signifiers mingling with
each other in space-time.

From the general examination of these four early works it can be said that Kagel
was playing with postmodern ideas. In this part of the early twenty-first century it is not
easy to arrive at a cogent set of tenets that apply to the term “postmodernism,” partly due
to overuse and the increased entropy of the word’s signification. An easy solution would
be to say that postmodernism is that which rejects or obliterates modernism, but that
would be an oversimplification. It is important to note that the relationship between
postmodernism and modernism is ambiguous at best, and so the two schools of thought
are not necessarily opposite or mutually exclusive. For example, Kagel’s postmodernist
approach requires modernist cultural practices, if only to subvert them, and so he engages
them in his compositions.\textsuperscript{8} Nevertheless, one can point to some aspects of these works

\textsuperscript{7}Dissemination is a concept from Derrida; a discussion can be found in Lawrence Kramer, \textit{Classical

\textsuperscript{8}Indeed, the eventual goal of this thesis is to demonstrate, as the title suggests, the intertwining of the two
cultural positions extant in Kagel’s piano music. This idea does not originate with the present writer; please
see Björn Heile, “Collage vs. Compositional Control: The Interdependency of Modernist and
and come to some understanding of how the earlier work of Kagel unequivocally falls under the rubric of postmodernist art:

1. There is subversion of formal continuity and expectations (disruption of serial technique in the Sexteto, reliance on performer choice for form in Transición II, and the absence of narrative in Staatstheater).

2. Traditional hierarchies are eliminated; in Sur Scène through the coexistence of “high-brow” elements (actor as academic critic) and “low-brow” elements (the presence of a mime, associated with street performers). In Staatstheater, there are no main characters, no superiority is given to artistic refinement (exercises are presented alongside solos), and whole “scenes” are intentionally trivial and devoid of meaning.

3. Heterogeneity and intertextuality is favored over unity and rational presentation in both Sur Scène and Staatstheater.

The list is short for the sake of brevity and to allow for a wider inquiry later in this thesis. The main contention is that Kagel was involving postmodern ideas from the beginning of his compositional career, and through the 1960s he created some of the most overtly postmodernist theatric art in Europe.

Not all of Kagel’s work from this period follows such extremes of irony and perplexity. Some of his other instrumental theatre pieces, such as Tremens (1963-65), do

follow a more coherent narrative structure. As Kagel develops a multiplicity of compositional paths into the 1970s (and expands into other multimedia formats such as film and radioplay, or Hörspiel), it becomes a moot point to belabor any notion of a singular trajectory for Kagel’s work; he continues to be somewhat of an aesthetic maverick even to this day. The only consistent thread, it could be argued, is that he is always interacting with current trends in contemporary musical culture. In the earlier work these trends include total serialism, interest in dramatic action (shared by Berio and Stockhausen), and an exploration of open forms (shared by Earle Brown). However, beginning with works in the 1970s, Kagel begins a more pro-active relationship with the sounds and forms of Western culture’s past, much like other composers at that time. His prodigious creative imagination enables him to uniquely incorporate this relationship into his compositional framework. There are some interesting and unexpected changes born in the 1970s decade that typify much of his style in the later works.

Compositional Styles post-1970

In the 1970s and ‘80s Kagel reformulated his musical language and approach to subject matter; his most recent works incorporate quasi-tonal, even diatonic, harmony, a more cohesive approach to dramatic narrative, and a return to conventional notation. Beginning in the early 1970s, Kagel began using material from the great canonic masters of Western music, showing an interest in forming a less violent approach to institutionalized traditions from the past. Ludwig van (1970) is a multi-media composition utilizing fragments from Beethoven scores and represents an anomalous
venture for Kagel: There is no material written by Kagel himself. This represents a sharp cleft from the chaotic wildness of the earlier pieces and exemplifies a newly-found discipline of restraint informing many of his later works. Kagel, loosening somewhat after *Ludwig Van*, takes the next step in the 1973 work *Variationen ohne Fuge über ‘Variationen und Fuge’ über ein Thema von Händel für Klavier op. 24 von Johannes Brahms (1861/62)*, using Brahms’s material but all the while transforming and muddling it beyond recognition. Kagel varies his version vertically using heterophonic effects (doubling the melody but using different intervals) and adding non-functional triads to the counterpoint, resulting in a kaleidoscopic polytonality.

At this point, it is essential to look at a composition in some depth for the sake of clarity. In *1898* (1972-3), Kagel returns to writing original music, but the residue from his recent encounters with the past (the immediate as well as the distant) affected this work’s style in various ways. It is scored for 11-17 players of mostly freely chosen instruments (piano and percussion are required) and twenty or so vocalizing children (or a tape recording made of the children’s vocalizations, which may be played back during the live performance). In 1998 Kagel explained his title choice, it being the year one century before, as well as his compositional restrictions:

Shortly beforehand, a miraculous change had occurred that allowed acoustic vibrations to be turned into visible, tangible and endlessly reproducible black discs . . . . This was the motivation for me in “1898” to strive to convey a musical X-ray of the end of the 19th century, and at the same time to try to effect a compositional reconstruction of the sound of the first, acoustically unstable recordings.

To do this it was necessary to redefine the treatment of timbre, namely as the product of instruments playing together. To start with, I decided in principle to reject the idea of achieving harmonic complexity by overlapping dense chords or clusters. Instead, I limited myself to the orchestration of two monodies, which are inextricably interwoven throughout both movements of the piece, like Ariadne’s melodic threads.
In this way, constant unisons and multiple octave doublings create remarkable sonorities that seem to hover over a weighed-down no-man’s-land which is pervaded by the aura of an epoch that is coming to an end, but already exudes the fragrance of a joyous eruption into the more radical modern music. Perhaps this is a sort of musical report on a time where one inhales tonally, and exhales atonally.9

Imposing more control over his work (as he does in other works from around this time), Kagel restricts himself to the “orchestration of two monodies” augmented by a percussion line. Kagel’s “melodic threads” consist of strings of chromatically altered broken triads, fast repeated notes ornamented by grace notes at various intervallic distances, and meandering chromatic lines. The textures that arise from this treatment give the musical product a relentless, obsessive quality. This quality is noteworthy because it is a recurrent signature of Kagel’s style in much of his later instrumental pieces, especially the piano music. Figure 1 (see next page) displays page 66 from the score demonstrating some of these qualities.

An important question arises: Is it possible to describe Kagel’s style in this piece as something normative from 1970? Or, put another way, could someone well-versed in recent music history accurately discern the period of time in which this piece was written? It may indeed be difficult to place this music, since the arrangement of repetitive figures into triadic sonorities “references” past music, i.e., the late Romanticism of Mahler or Strauss. Also, doubling melodies at unisons and multiple octaves is a traditional technique of orchestration, but the starkness of this effect in the context of this piece conveys, in Kagel’s view, the mood of an “epoch-ending” period that will see massive upheaval in the next (20th) century.

Kagel, then, places the musical experience of \textit{1898} at a conjugated crossroads of time; at once in the past (the sounds and timbres thereof) but also in the present by way of a freer expressiveness many composers allowed themselves in the 1970s. However, Kagel does not engage in conservative forms of “neo-tonal” practices, unlike some
composers active at this time. There is no direct quotation, nor adherence to any foregone set of rules (i.e., functional tonality) that allude to a specific style or compositional personality. How, then, does Kagel organize this triadic material? Some discussion exists of his adaptation of serial techniques to triadic material and the conflicts inherent in such a practice. Perhaps this is how Kagel can achieve his feeling of “inhaling tonally” and “exhaling atonally” in 1898. Though this may inform an understanding of Kagel’s compositional organization at the local level, an investigation of these processes does not necessarily reveal, in this writer’s view, broader features of the form or textural diversity.

There is in Kagel’s work from the 1970s (and onwards) a return to formal organization that suggests the presence of dramatic narrative, but with less overtly theatrical action. Instead of a self-conscious effort to expose the dramatic possibilities of performers’ physical actions, Kagel channels his sense of the dramatic into the music itself. Though a work such as 1898 does have some suggestive programmatic content, the music lies in a state of relative autonomy whereby dramatic effect is achieved primarily through musical means. For instance, passages in 1898 that are lyrical and languid give way to tremendous growths of extremely agitated activity, which then die away, either gradually or suddenly, back to periods of relative inactivity. All of this happens on a sonic level; there is no explicitly devised action on part of the performers (although the children do walk on and off stage before and after their performances) that amplify the musical experience.

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10See Heile 2002. A brief quote summarizes Kagel’s “dysfunctional” tonality: “Chords are assigned numbers, and their sequence is governed by numerical rows. The intervals of the ‘non-linear transpositions’ are controlled by a numerical series. Serial tonality, then, fuses—or rather forces together—the incompatible: it is systematically impure and intentionally unorganic.” (292)
Another work demonstrative of Kagel’s embracing of narrative continuity is *Sankt-Bach-Passion* (1981-85), a large work that surveys the life of Bach and retains many of the conventions of the Passion genre. Kagel once again reintegrates himself with one of the most prominent figures of European music history. It is scored for a typical Kagelian large ensemble: mezzo-soprano, tenor, baritone, speaker/narrator, three choirs, and an orchestra utilizing piano duet, organ, celeste, harpsichord, and two harps. Though the text is an altered collage of variegated source material (including Bach’s letters, words from his works, articles, even Bach’s obituary), it follows a more or less conventional chronological path through the life of the great composer. Much of the music refers to Bach’s music in diverse ways through use of dense counterpoint, chorale writing, and descending chromatic scales. Yet the music is purely of Kagel’s imagination, however it may be influenced and tempered by stylistic devices found in Bach’s works. Because of the forces involved (and how those forces are treated), there is more dramatic presentation in this work along with Kagel’s usual sense of irony, but it does not sunder the narrative development to the point of dispersement.

Kagel’s instrumental music from this period reflects many of the issues discussed above: a preoccupation with elements from music of the past, an interest in reinventing (rather than rejecting) standard forms, and an obsession with the triad and all of its connotative energy. Indeed, they also tend to be titled in direct reference to nineteenth-century genres; some examples include “grand duo,” “intermezzo,” and “phantasiestück” in their titles. These features may lead some to mistakenly label these works “neo-

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11For instance, the form of the Passion as Bach knew it is generally followed, but there are no extended arias, and other aspects are exaggerated; choirs often chant, employ *Sprechgesang*, or shriek instead of sing. Also, Bach as a character takes the place of God and Christ in this work!
romantic,” especially since triadic sonorities predominate the musical fabric.

Nevertheless, while there may be an obsessive presence of tertian harmony in a recent Kagel work, the various treatments of this harmony (e.g., collage with opposing textures, use of “serial tonality,” layers of polyrhythm) resemble nothing of the work of the more commercially successful neo-romantic composers.¹²

In his earlier period of work, it is obvious that Kagel had shown an uncanny ability to investigate any and all conventions associated with modern musical composition by simultaneously participating within and subverting established paradigms. It has been stated above that earlier Kagel is almost a kind of ultimate postmodernist art. Or, put another way, Kagel’s early work often comments on the assumptions of modernism, i.e., a positive belief in technological progress, an often unquestioned respect for the original and new, and the dominance of a rational orthodoxy that determines a hierarchical system of musical value. His skepticism toward conformist tradition (parodied relentlessly in Staatstheater), the subversion of compositional disciplines (which can be traced back to his earliest works, such as Sexteto), and the deconstruction of accepted forms all lend credence to the notion that Kagel is one of the essential postmodernist composers.

But what is Kagel up to in his latest music? Is his exploration of older forms a “neo-conservative” form of postmodernist art? Are the tonal references and romantic-genre titles just another spin on current postmodern positions? Also, has Kagel fully abandoned his sense of theatric action and drama so prevalent in his earlier works? After

¹²Some examples that exemplify a more conservative notion of “neo-romanticism” include works by American composers Del Tredici, Corigliano, Rzewski, and Rouse; from the European continent the later repertoire of Penderecki and Schnittke serve as justifiable examples.
all, many of his recent works contain little to no theatric directions and most closely resemble absolute music (i.e., without overtly programmatic content).

It is this writer’s contention that Kagel’s earlier work displays an *antagonistic* postmodernist position, a position that explodes modernist presumptions and attacks convention in an aggressive manner. The later works (1970 and onward), on the other hand, display an *integrational* postmodernism, one that embraces rational organization and conventional devices as well as collage, referentiality, and pluralist expressivity.

The musicologist Björn Heile has asserted with conviction that Kagel is (and always has been) incorporating elements of modernism and postmodernism, or that these processes lie on a continuum and do not remain entirely antithetical to one another.¹³ This thesis will proceed from that perspective. But Kagel’s innovation is not to merely combine the modern with the postmodern, but to also give rise to a new kind of holistic dramatic narrative through the articulation of transformational processes that are informed by a modernist/postmodernist double-helix. Thus, Kagel’s sense for the dramatic becomes channeled into the unfolding of the “ideological” conflicts built into the music. It is a kind of Hegelian process that synthesizes seemingly incompatible cultural theories, modernism and postmodernism, into something that transcends the various ideologies swimming together in Kagel’s aesthetic space.

Before proceeding to the piano works, a pertinent summary of these two cultural theories and their roles in music will be provided in order to aid access to the analysis that follows.

CHAPTER 2
MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM: A SYNOPSIS

No consensual assertions about postmodernism can be made without considering the criteria associated with concepts of modernism. Modernism itself is consistent with myriad ideological premises that resist easy categorization, and contradictions abound. It may perhaps be more convenient (at least in this brief exercise) to imagine both terms incorporating a complex philosophical topology (i.e., as sharing the one side of the Möbius strip) that transforms knowledge to a considerable extent but does so in a continuous or interweaving manner. One is easily misled by the prefix “post” into thinking that the terms represent a clean chronological cleft in history, or collections of ideas completely antithetical to one another; neither case can be defended easily when considering the array of discourses (or disciplines, such as the visual arts or critical history) that interpret these terms in different ways. Thus, modernism and postmodernism are fluid spheres that overlap and feed off each other considerably, and the “post” can be viewed as a conduit between the two. In other words, before one can define postmodernism, it is vital to have a definition for modernism.
Modernism

Modernism is a Western cultural term, and its origins lie in the overturning of the ideals and aesthetics of Romanticism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{14} It represents a tumultuous paradigm shift from the universal and enduring ideal of beauty to a freer vision of provisional or subjective aesthetics. It affected all the arts and cultural areas, and its spirit reflected the upheaval occurring in European and American society at the time. The common thread throughout the modernists’s broad-based efforts was a sustained and progressive exploration of the new, the experimental, and the foreign.\textsuperscript{15} The logical outcome was a multiplicity of individualistic positions, resulting in the many “isms” commonly invoked in the historiography of modernist movements.\textsuperscript{16} In pursuing this trajectory, modernist work also allied itself with an elitist valuation concept and removed itself from the surrounding society in a search for purer autonomy. At the same time, modernists were attempting to fuse artistic innovation with history–all great art was to be true to its time, reflective of a specific set of dynamic forces that could have the potential to change society.\textsuperscript{17}

Modernist art was conscious of contemporary society, because it was often involved in an uneasy relationship with the surrounding social environment: The claims

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\textsuperscript{17}Botstein, \textit{New Grove Online} 2003.
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of Marx, existentialist thought, Darwin’s theory of evolution, Freud’s exposure of the human psyche, and the widespread manifestation of modern capitalism all contributed to the rejection of an encompassing communal worldview. Instead, artists and writers were thrust against the de-centering of humanity and the “fictions” of contingent realities.\textsuperscript{18}

In the visual arts, innovative and abstract interpretations of reality (e.g., the Cubism of Braque and Picasso, the Primitivism of Matisse, and the Futurism of Malevich) were preferred to the realistic recreations prominent in Romantic-era painting. In contrast to this, the Bauhaus School of modern architecture witnessed a surrender of decorative style in favor of a purer functionality and geometrical solutions to problems of structure, reflecting a stout faith in rationalism.\textsuperscript{19} These differing cultural movements provide good examples of the multiple lines of discourse found in modernism. Yet both share a rejection of Romantic sensibilities; “realism” in the visual arts and “style” in architecture were to be avoided.

The literary arts also saw the rejection of its respective nineteenth-century conventions, including realism and narrative flow. Writers such as Pound, Woolf, Eliot, and Joyce wrote experimental texts influenced by Freud’s theories of the unconscious. Their searches for new, personalized language were often achieved by breaking grammatical rules and/or inventing new words and syntax (e.g., “stream of consciousness” in Joyce). Narrative structures were fragmented and distorted, leaving the common reader behind. Indeed, many proponents of modernist writing tried to combat

\textsuperscript{18} Bradbury and McFarlane 1978, 24-27.

\textsuperscript{19} See a presentation of the Bauhaus School (consisting chiefly of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Walter Gropius) in Tim Woods, \textit{Beginning Postmodernism}, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 89-93.
the threat of vapid mass-produced media with their elitist vision of higher cultural purpose. Their works were meant for an idealized minority of insiders who would support their progressive ideas. At the same time, many modernist writers (such as Pound in his *ABC of Reading*) tried to reach the now well-educated common reader by introducing sophisticated aesthetics in textbooks and articles. Trapped by discipline and academic stagnation, the common reader’s weak state of critical thinking was to be brought up to the interpretational level required to understand modernist fiction.\(^20\) Again, in this case modernist discourse can be seen as a critique of the contemporary society with which so many modernists held an antagonistic relationship.

The modernist paradigm shift in music involved many of the same tactics and qualities discussed above in the other arts disciplines, due to the rich cross-fertilization between them in the early twentieth century. Composers were rejecting the Romantic-era traditions of narrative flow (e.g., in the tone-poem), sentimentalism, and established genres. Most important, however, was the final breakup in the early twentieth century of tonality as an organizing force and psychological referant of tension and release. Though tonality had been stretched to the brink of non-functionality in music by the older Liszt and Mahler, it was Schoenberg who took the crucial step in his early atonal pieces, abandoning harmonic closure completely and embracing dissonance to a degree never before attempted. The twelve-tone method developed (though not invented) by Schoenberg exemplified a new kind of logical basis for building musical structures (perhaps reflecting the rationalism seen in Bauhaus architecture). However, many of the

emotive features of the surface of twelve-tone as well as the freely atonal works (such as Schoenberg’s *Pierrot lunaire*) engaged a despairing “expressionism” tainted by the loss of the ideal Beauty so celebrated in Romanticism.\(^{21}\)

Therefore, one possible view of musical modernism, at least in the main branch of atonalism, could be in a dialectic vein: The quest for rational, scientific-minded systems (extreme objectivity) is tempered by an anarchic explosion of dark or primal emotive characteristics (extreme subjectivity); this synthesis formulates a “crisis” in which there is a sense of impending disaster—the irony of modernism is that it hovers in an “uneasiness” that stems from the obligatory, but not altogether desirable, rejection of Romanticism.

Many individual streams in modernist music forged individual stylistic subversions of Romantic aesthetics, often sharing and reflecting traits from their counterparts in the visual arts. Stravinsky explored the “cult of primitivism”\(^{22}\) and pagan ritual in *Le Sacre du printemps* (1912), implying a subtle (though not through subtle music!) critique (or negation) of civilization in its celebration of nihilist topics of violence and barbarity. The music utilizes irregular rhythmic structures and octatonic harmony (an exotic pitch collection known for its lack of tonal center) that suggest an emphatically folk aura.\(^{23}\) Other composers such as Bartók, Chavez, Kodály, and Janácek investigated folk idioms from their respective nationalities, asserting the modernist stance of formulating alternatives to the dominant Germanic tonal practice. Another strand was


\(^{22}\)“*Le Sacre . . . belongs to the cult of primitivism. The rituals of pagan Russia possessed an attraction as a contrast to the refinement of modern society…” (Etter 2001, 133).

the Italian Futurist school (reflective of the same position in visual art), whose adherents incorporated machine-produced noise into their music. Using current technology to create specialized instruments, these radical composers (e.g., Russolo and Piatti) were transmitting “music of the future” to audiences. American experimentalism from Ives, Cowell, Varèse, and Ruggles showed an interest in flexible forms, angular dissonance (including microtonality), and fervent individuality. Ives especially demonstrates a modernist aesthetic in his techniques of collage, skepticism of established tradition, and mass sound events that belie any hierarchy of melody and harmony. There are many other streams of musical modernism; some are positioned against the aesthetics of other strands (such as Dadaism’s stance against progress and autonomy\(^{24}\)), reinforcing again the multiplicity of modernist thought.

But the most influential and far-reaching discourse in musical modernism from the early twentieth century was that of the Second Viennese School, with Schoenberg at the helm.\(^{25}\) This discourse remained dominant through World War II and transformed into high modernism in the post-war period. This logical transformation was made possible by the increasingly totalizing rationality implicit in the serial method: Its proponents (Webern, Boulez, Stockhausen, et al.) seized upon the progressive aspects of serial technique and wielded integrated controls over all aspects of both the musical surface and form. It is crucial to note that many of the modernist composers who did not immediately embrace serial technique before the war (e.g., Stravinsky, Messiaen, Copland) did so after the war. Institutionalization of high modernist technique in

\(^{24}\)Williams 1997, 3-4.

universities and elite artistic societies (Darmstadt and Donaueschingen, for instance) led to the dominating aspect of its omnipresence in post-war composition. But its severe esotericism created a wide gap between the serialist school and any mass audience. The prominent critical theorist Theodor Adorno, who championed the culmination of the dialectical rationalism in Schoenberg, became highly critical of what he considered the excesses of high modernism: Objectification of material becomes an end in itself, eradicating the subjective voice of the composer. From this perspective would come the challenges of postmodernism, which attacked the foundations and elitism of high modernism in a substantive way.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is impossible to define as a single movement; like its cultural progenitor modernism, it encompasses a wide spectrum of positions, attitudes, and methods of denotation and connotation. It is perhaps less a revolution in some areas than in others, and certainly assumes markedly different qualities dependent on the ideological perspective of a given field of inquiry. Though it is difficult to precisely elucidate postmodernism’s origins, Arnold Toynbee is credited with coining the term in A Study of History (1939), where the word is associated with a future episode in history. Its meaning at first was fluid: while it can refer to a period of time supposedly after

modernity (the “post” prefix connotes a chronological line), it is also often characterized as a generally skeptical mood towards the philosophies and accomplishments of modernism.30

Postmodernist positions began to take shape in the fields of architecture, the visual arts, and literary criticism in the 1960s.31 First, a consideration of the postmodern in architecture will introduce the dialectical tension between the tactics of the modern and the postmodern modes. Because the modernist line in architecture was associated with the Bauhaus School, the postmodern reaction challenged their aesthetic. Instead of faith in the purity of function, rational ornamentless construction, and a stern asceticism, the postmodern architect concentrated on what Charles Jencks calls “double-coding”:

an architecture that was professionally based and popular as well as one that was based on new techniques and old patterns. Double coding to simplify means both elite/popular and new/old and there are compelling reasons for these opposite pairings. Today’s Post-Modern architects were trained by Modernists, and are committed to using contemporary technology as well as facing current social reality…Postmodernism has the essential double meaning: the continuation of Modernism and its transcendence.32

Thus, it is explicitly stated that postmodernist architecture does not simply reject the techniques of the modern; rather, the postmodernist can engage high modernist traits (e.g., geometrical solutions, employment of modern technology) while at the same time incorporate aspects of alternative ideology. Double-coding can also mean communication with differing societal groups; a structure may have certain meanings for the informed architect, but other aesthetic aspects can also reach the layperson. Appeals to popular

30Jencks 1986, 6.

31Woods 1999, 52, 89, 125.

32Jencks 1986, 14-5.
taste, multiple depths of meaning, and hybridization were just as important as form and function. For example, Robert Graham’s *Olympic Arch* built in Los Angeles in 1984 displays sculptures of perfectly realized “ideal” human athletes (referencing classical aesthetics), but in a setting that contains plain geometrical shapes and symmetry (reflecting high modernist concerns). Yet despite these multiple historical references, it was created with combinations of materials (bronze, metal, and granite) that irrefutably implicate the work as a denizen of contemporary life. The multiplicity of aesthetics from different periods in Western culture, within one work, is indicative of postmodern art in general; postmodern works tend to be playful with wide-ranging metaphors and symbols in a non-hierarchical or non-judgmental way. Postmodern cultural artifacts therefore often involve an intricate game of semiotic connotation and denotation, especially and most obviously in the visual arts.

The postmodern mode in the visual arts has, in general, strayed away from the rigorous abstraction and higher authority of modernism. Instead, postmodern art tends towards a pluralism of styles, a playfulness with regards to signs and meanings, and a return to depiction and allegory—all of which reflects the tendencies in postmodern architecture mentioned above. The blurring of the previously distinguishable fields of visual art and sculpture is endemic of postmodern art objects in their incorporation of computerized technology, bizarre materials, “on-site” construction, and video installation. While there were many movements (or “isms”) in the pre-1960s modernist diaspora, it

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33See a picture and caption in Jencks 1986, 8.


could be argued that there are even more numerous postmodernist movements and branches. This leads to a discernible difficulty in situating postmodernist work within some kind of referential sphere, but there have been some main branches formulated. Some of these include Pattern Painting, Neo-Expressionism, Neo-Geo (a dispassionate form of geometric abstraction), New British Sculpture, and Super-Realism (or Photorealism.)\(^\text{36}\) It is interesting to note the abundance of \textit{neo}-movements, indicating the rerouting of a previous modernist (or earlier) movement in history, cast into the present via a new synthesis of styles. The period after the 1960s has been referred to by philosopher Arthur Danto as “post-historical,” whereby artwork that incorporates multiple styles from a broad period of time eradicates a sense of historical placement and also prohibits any criterion of unified style.\(^\text{37}\) Artists were also experimenting with a collage of popular culture and modernist techniques, creating a parodic juxtaposition that held the hegemony of elitism in question.\(^\text{38}\) Others, such as the Conceptual artists in the late 1960s, were to attack modernist notions that defined the social import or function of art and its related discourses; originality was seen as an impossibility, and self-consciousness towards the institution of the art exhibit was the order of the day.\(^\text{39}\) All of this can be construed as a deconstructive approach to the humanist experience of “elevation” in the contemplation of high art.\(^\text{40}\) In other words, postmodern artists were in

\(^{36}\)Woods 1999, 125-6.


a critical mode towards Enlightenment valuations of progress and knowledge, and this questioning mode induced a climactic change in many social and cultural fields at this time. Academics and critics, philosophers and historians aligned themselves with the postmodern mode (often with a Marxist bent) and contributed to the “rise of theory” in the late 1960s and early 1970s.  

One of the seminal philosophical works that occupied a confrontational position towards modernist values and Enlightenment virtues was Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979, trans. 1984). Lyotard exemplifies the postmodern mood in this book by challenging the dominant cultural institutions (the “metanarratives” of religious salvation, teleological historicism, or any progressive philosophy striving towards universal peace) and their claims to legitimate knowledge:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal.  

This is an attack against universalism in grand narratives; the “crisis of metaphysical philosophy” produces a profound skepticism toward any overarching explanations of reality. In this work Lyotard is also critiquing the modernist appeal to progress-centered foundations that might lead to an improved society, the ideal of

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41The phrase “rise of theory” is Christopher Butler’s; see Butler 2002, 5-6.


43Ibid., xxiii-xxiv.
consensus (based in the metanarrative of emancipation) is an inadequate legitimization of knowledge because this consensus is usually achieved through the imposition of power.44

The relationship between discourse and power (explored by Michel Foucault in his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1977]) is another one of the important intersections of postmodern inquiry, and could be the most important ethical argument in postmodernist thought for resistance to authoritative systems.45 Discourses can be used to empower or marginalize groups; they exclude that which they define as outside and manipulate ideas of the normative. Discourses and their practitioners can define what is considered “natural” or “normal” through their prevailing political authority and exert control over minds with the power of words. This reading of the inseparable bond between power and discursive systems (law, medicine, aesthetic doctrine, etc.) has been the cornerstone of postmodern critical thought that debunks metanarratives, or “metadiscourses.” Some examples of these viewpoints include a great deal of feminist theory (versus the male-dominant metadiscourse), post-colonial theory (versus a grand narrative of Western imperialism), and historical reconstruction (versus historicism subject to severe ideological bias).46

What is the technique or method by which postmodern positions are reached? The central process of postmodernist debunking is *deconstruction* (the term was used earlier in this thesis in a few different contexts), formulated in its nascent stages by French

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44Ibid., 60-1.
45Butler 2002, 44.
46Ibid., 15, 32-6, 44-50, 57.
philosopher Jacques Derrida. Much like the treatment of the term “postmodernism,”
deconstruction as a practice has been the victim of assumption, overuse, and misuse,
rendering its meaning since the 1970s all but useless. Derrida’s deconstructive technique
in his own works (such as *De la grammatologie* [1967]) reveals a complex interaction:
The deconstructive process does not simply destroy or merely contradict a given narrative
or argument, but attempts to unravel the thought processes and reflexive conditioning
*behind* the narrative. In this way, the process sustains an engaged critique of the larger
structure responsible for the prejudices and biased conclusions within the “text,” which
through deconstruction may be shown to contain inner contradictions.47

Deconstruction and the arguments espoused by Lyotard and others have given rise
to the relativist framework toward critical thought in all cultural areas. Postmodern
thinkers believe that much of what one considers real or true can and/or has been shown
to be constructed from the culturally dominant ideologies—the very same ideologies under
attack from Lyotard. The trend in postmodernist (deconstructionist) discourse, therefore,
is decidedly towards the left of the political spectrum; it denies that there is any ultimate
dialectical synthesis (Hegel) of humanity’s emancipation.48 It does not matter whether
this synthesis be the Marxist utopia of proletarian rule or the totalizing efficiency of late
capitalism49—no complete, overarching truth can be appropriately accessed by the whole

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47For a good explanation of the deconstructive process, see a discussion of Derrida’s critique of Lévi-
Strauss and “logocentrism” (found in Derrida’s *De la grammatologie*) in Christopher Johnson, *Derrida*
(New York: Routledge, 1999).

(Accessed 8 August 2003), <http://www.grovemusic.com>

49Fredric Jameson argues against postmodernism from a Marxist perspective; he perceives postmodernist
discourse to be implicitly or explicitly a defense for “late capitalism”—the current economic condition and
culture of alienation, depthlessness, and de-historicisation. But can the Marxist/Socialist goal (or
utopianism) also be construed, in the Lyotardian sense, as a vulnerable metanarrative worthy of
of humanity. There are too many competing “language games,” and none truly corresponds adequately to reality, since all texts, whether philosophical, literary, or historical, rely heavily on the use of metaphor. In other words, an objective state of discourse is impossible, and in fact discourses unravel themselves due to their inability to convincingly refer to reality.\textsuperscript{50} This previous statement seems to be one of the fundaments of postmodernist critique.

The postmodernist skepticism towards objectivity had related repercussions. The modern idea of the existence of a true “code” that must be deciphered in order to find the meaning of metaphors within a given text underwent scrutiny in the literary arts and its corresponding studies. The literary critic and semiotician Roland Barthes had this to say about the relationship between author, text, and meaning:

>We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture…the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original.\textsuperscript{51}

Within this quote lies an infusion of postmodern ideas: the impossibility of originality (an idea explored by the Conceptual artists), the notion of multiple possibilities of interpretation (recalling Jenck’s “double-coding”), and the refusal to accept one totalized meaning weaned from a given narrative (a deconstruction of authorial intent). Barthes advocated the location of interpretation to be not in the critic’s domain (who through professional authority could claim a “final signified”), but instead

\textsuperscript{50}Butler 2002, 24-5.

\textsuperscript{51}From the “Death of the Author” essay in Barthes 1977, 146.
within that of the reader, where the work’s actual “unity” resides; or where an interpretation constituted by the text is held together.\footnote{Ibid., 147-8.}

An attitude regarding the self as the subjective constructor of meaning found its place in postmodern fiction, where authors such as William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, John Hawkes, and Donald Barthelme sought to explore a kind of linguistic and referential play.\footnote{Woods 1999, 49-51.} An obsession with self-conscious reflexivity emerged in this literature as authors embraced the impossibility of originality.\footnote{Ibid., 52.} The general aesthetic result (if one can be gleaned from the sheer amount of literary works considered to be in the postmodern “category”) was a subversion of plot and character, allusive explication, as well as the intermingling of styles, ranging from kitsch to modes of “high” culture.\footnote{Calinescu 1987, 285.}

The permeation of postmodernism in so many of our cultural areas can perhaps be traced to the “social saturation of the self” explained by psychologist Kenneth Gergen in his book \textit{The Saturated Self} (1991). The constant barrage of information (often in the form of packets or messages and always conflicting with each other), and the global increase of general communicative activity\footnote{For a broad observation of the increasing sense of pace in contemporary life see James Gleick, \textit{Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything} (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).} that contemporary personages (at least within postindustrial societies) endure all contributes to the qualities of multiple identity, disunity, and dehistoricization associated with postmodern thought. In postmodernity, the self not only constructs meanings from texts which are themselves constructions of already existing “writings” (Barthes), but the self is \textit{also constructed} from a multiplicity
of “others”: The postmodern self is an assembled package of innumerable characters from the past and present.\textsuperscript{57} Thus, the pluralism of postmodernity is manifested in the works and cultural products of artists and theorists that are themselves postmodern beings.

This brief (and rather incomplete) tour of postmodernism within this thesis should by now beg the question from the reader: How has the postmodern (or postmodernity) affected and/or produced new attitudes and approaches in the field of music? As in the other artistic fields, postmodernism in music developed in many different directions. It is possible to chart a roughly analogous aesthetic path, though this may be a serious oversimplification: Postmodern musical culture, more or less and in varying degrees, challenges (though does not necessarily repudiate) the assumptions and teleology of modernism (especially high modernism), reevaluates its relationship with the past, often incorporates or appropriates other sonic discourses (including popular idioms and music from outside Western culture), refutes or subverts the tonal narrative, and embraces the subjectivity of the composer. All, some, or even none of these descriptive functions may be present in any one piece—the multiplicity of approaches in postmodern musical discourse cannot be overstated.\textsuperscript{58} Despite a seemingly overwhelming eclecticism, musical postmodernism possesses strong correlations that tie in traits of the postmodern from


other artistic fields; this interpenetration reflects the postmodern concern for “situating” works of art within surrounding socio-historical and aesthetic contexts.\(^5^9\)

For example, the “quotations” of differing historical styles (and any accompanying distortions) cultivated within postmodern architecture finds its correlate in much contemporary music, where juxtapositions of older and newer styles can be found. Put another way, composers can be participants in the game of *intertextuality*, where all musical styles from past and present are allowed to float within the same space. In his *Makrokosmos* series, George Crumb utilizes quotations of Chopin and Bach within his own compositional style. Another work that exemplifies this trait is Schnittke’s *Concerto Grosso No. 1*, where Baroque forms and techniques are interspersed with prepared piano sounds and dissonant, high-modernist style string writing. Berio’s *Sinfonia* is another oft-cited example of musical postmodernism; the third movement “hangs” bits of material from Bach, Debussy, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Stockhausen, et al. upon a central structure which itself is a quotation—the scherzo from Mahler’s Second Symphony. Paul Griffiths interprets *Sinfonia* as an example of meta-music, a new genre that acts as vehicle for the assemblage of quotations working in ironic contrast to one another (Kagel’s *Ludwig van* could fall into the meta-music genre).\(^6^0\)

Another example of the cross-disciplinary interpenetration of postmodern positions is the slackening of the modernist binary opposition of high vs. low, or elite cultural schemes (representing a minority community) vs. “popular” tastes (representing

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\(^{59}\) Though this may be stating the obvious, the entire present chapter is provided in order to give a broad cultural context for Kagel’s musical approaches. In order to benefit the reader, this exposition facilitates the analysis provided later.

\(^{60}\) Griffiths 1995, 165-7.
a majority community, or “the masses”). Being one of the more readily apparent attitudes throughout the postmodern spectrum, it pervades visual art and film as well as architecture, literature, and music. Some composers reference pop or jazz styles in their musical figurations (e.g., Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and Terry Riley) while exploring other processes, while others directly compose pop styles through appropriation or collage techniques (e.g., Michael Daugherty, Paul Lansky, Steve Mackey, and John Zorn). This questioning of what was formerly regarded as “illegitimate” represents not just a reevaluation of contemporary composers’ aesthetic choices, but also a renewed fervor in reaching wider receptivity in audiences outside the minority of the elite audience found in the academy. It can also represent (especially in the music of Michael Nyman, La Monte Young, and Gavin Bryars) a directional change from complexity towards a hierarchy-abolishing simplicity.⁶¹

In John Cage’s work can be found one of the most important segues from high modernism to postmodernism in avant-garde culture. In his earlier work, Cage utilized a rationality consistent with the systematism of high-modernist serial technique. Cage’s replacement of the serial discipline with his derivations of chance procedures represented a subversion of the high-modernist narrative, though some resulting pieces (such as *Music of Changes*) were in the end as determinably structured as any serialized composition. Later, Cage would depend more on the performer (or performers) to realize his ideas (such as in *Variations IV*), reflecting the Barthesian notion of emphasizing the reader/performer over the author/composer as the realizer of intent.⁶² Cage can be seen as

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⁶²For a discussion of this work and its relevance to postmodern positions, see Williams 1997, 69-72.
the principal instigator of the gradual shift away from the dominant ideology of high-modernist progressive serialism. His work and thought stands as a bridge between the ideas and experiments of the Conceptual arts movement (e.g., the attack on autonomy and originality) and the Lyotardian decentering of historical progress in music: He endorsed the concept of an “absent-minded” playfulness as part of the process of avant-garde musical composition. Some aspect of his work influences, either negatively or positively, nearly every genre of contemporary music today.

Many composers sought other freedoms from the severe rigidity and intellectualism of high modernism. They embraced aspects of tonality and narrative in different degrees and became reacquainted with direct expressivity and nuance. While a return to or reworking of tonal practices is something unique to the field of music, it does hold loose analogies with the fields of visual art (in the return towards allegory and depiction and away from abstraction) and literature (in the return to genre storytelling, albeit usually within a subversive framework). This is not to say that all composers who engaged with tonal ideas completely rejected dissonance or even modernist techniques; it is crucial here to echo Jonathan Kramer’s distinction between “antimodern” aesthetics (an almost zealous return to conventions from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and

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63 And what is the purpose of writing music? One is, of course, not dealing with purposes but dealing with sounds. Or the answer must take the form of a paradox: a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we’re living, which is so excellent once one gets one’s mind and one’s desires out of its way and lets it act of it own accord.” (John Cage, *Silence* [Hanover: Wesleyan University Press 1961], 12). Italic emphasis in this quote was added in order to highlight Cage’s subtle critique of the high modernist “desire” for increased control and deeply structural relationships.

64 An example is the novel by the postmodernist theorist Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (1983); it is a detective story that never actually gets “solved” in the traditional sense.
a nostalgic stylization of gesture) and “true” postmodernism. Some examples of antimodernist works include those by Del Tredici, Zwilich, Lieberman, and late Penderecki; in this music there is a definite reversion to the past. Postmodern works do not simply revert to old values but instead transform and question them dialectically, often through a compositionally deconstructive mode. Some examples have been mentioned throughout the discussion above, and as the subsequent analysis will show, Kagel’s works also show a more ambiguous (postmodern) relationship to the conventions and genres of the past.

The previous discussion should reveal some of the impact that postmodern cultural attitudes in Western culture have had upon contemporary music-making. Postmodern ideas have also infiltrated the field of music scholarship and have introduced a kind of revolution within its more formalized spheres. Scholarly inquiry (musicological as well as analytical) was challenged by Joseph Kerman to become more critical of its interpretations; according to him it needed to justify its epistemology within a broader cultural context, utilizing models of literary and cultural criticism. The influx of postmodern ideas into musicology and analysis throughout the 1980s and ‘90s helped to energize an integration of the two disciplines, which was seen as a necessary movement by postmodern scholars and researchers (it remains a movement which is of course incomplete!). An influential figure here is Lawrence Kramer, who argued that postmodern ideas can feed the demand for human interest in the field of musical

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inquiry. The result has been a rich explosion of inter-disciplinary research, so that many of today’s postmodern music scholars (e.g., Susan McClary, Rose Subotnik, Gary Tomlinson, Richard Leppert, Simon Miller, Robert Walser, Richard Taruskin, and Carolyn Abbate) reflect the positions outlined in the latter part of this chapter: suspicion towards hierarchy, truth as relative, deconstruction of power systems, and support for opportunities in research that transcend conservative formalism.

Therefore, it should also be noted that this thesis has been influenced by postmodern ideas, for it is important from this writer’s perspective to understand how the tension between postmodernism and modernism dramatizes Kagel’s music. The previous discussion is an attempt to distinguish modernism from postmodernism for the purposes of clarity and conceptualization, but the next section will briefly “deconstruct” this idea, showing how modernism and postmodernism can be construed as much more closely related, and what repercussions this will have upon an analysis of Kagel’s music.

68 The list is a conflation of musicologists mentioned in Pasler 2002 and those noted as most prominent within the “New Musicology” by McClary in Susan McClary, Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1-2.
69 This is a paraphrase of Pasler’s overview of postmodern scholarship; see Pasler 2002.
70 A utilization of Lyotard’s viewpoints will aid this. The selection of some of his points is not coincidental or arbitrary; Lyotard has made remarks about Kagel’s music in line with the goals of this thesis. See Jean-François Lyotard, The Inhuman: Reflections on Time, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 176.
It may be worth revisiting the point made at the beginning of this chapter regarding the fluidity and breadth of the meanings associated with postmodernism. Since the term has been used in connection with so many cultural areas, it can be viable to say that in its broadest sense, “postmodernism,” as a term, includes both poles (and the gray area in between) of many binary oppositions: is it an extension of modernism or a break from modernism? Is it negative or positive? Does it criticize contemporary life or celebrate it? Are postmodern works truly receptive to wider audiences or do they simply pander to a less homogenous elite? Is postmodern art a vital cultural force or is it simply a dependent reinforcement of late capitalist market commodification? These questions in part comprise the “postmodern debate” fomenting in intellectual circles today. These questions may have to be situated “locally,” within their respective fields, considering that postmodernism in, say, literature does not necessarily coincide (either temporally or aesthetically) with postmodern architecture. Or, to turn over a familiar phrase, one man’s postmodernism may be another’s modernism, and vice versa. For example, the Dadaism of the early 1920s (a Modernist movement) can certainly be tied to the postmodern Conceptual movement in the 1960s; they share the questioning spirit toward the purpose and function of art and its feasibility. The latter movement was a critique of modernist values, but so was the former. Is it worthwhile or useful to consider if one is more modern or more “post” than the other?

The relationship between modernity and postmodernity is eloquently summarized in a more recent writing by Lyotard, in his essay “Rewriting Modernity” (trans. 1991):
Postmodernity is not a new age, but the rewriting of some of the features claimed by modernity, and first of all modernity’s claim to ground its legitimacy on the project of liberating humanity as a whole through science and technology. But as I have said, that rewriting has been at work, for a long time now, in modernity itself.\textsuperscript{71}

In other words, Lyotard is rejecting the urge to diachronically assert a periodization of modernity followed by a periodization of postmodernity. Indeed, quoting Lyotard again, “Modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity.”\textsuperscript{72}—it is a cyclic cultural reality. The paradox of modernity and postmodernity is a non-paradox. The questioning of previous assertions, implicit in the spirit of modernity, is also a function of postmodernism, which in turn questions the modern (e.g., notions of totality, unity, progressively “organic” experience through abstraction). In music, where the evocation of the past can mean a number of different things, there exists the possibility of “rewriting” aspects of the modern, whereby an evocation of the past does not necessarily imply a backwards-looking nostalgia (antimodernism), but a way of transgressing or circumventing preestablished rules in order to encourage a de-categorization. The postmodern work is not the antithesis of the modern, but rather a re-presentation that allows the experience of the sublime in its intensification of “strange” combinations.\textsuperscript{73}

This last statement is one that guides the analysis of Kagel’s piano music to follow. It has been observed that Kagel himself alludes to the inseparability of

\textsuperscript{71}Lyotard 1991, 34.

\textsuperscript{72}Ibid., 25.

modernism and postmodernism in his discussions on these subjects.\textsuperscript{74} The unexpected combinations of seemingly oppositional techniques\textsuperscript{75} within his works can result in a drama (or, an experience of the sublime feeling in the disruption of that drama), a drama (or narrative) that is suggested via highly connotative titles. The analyses are centered around the constituents of Kagel’s music (musical figures, polyrhythm, counterpoint, triadic sonorities) and his processes of transformation, which may be associated with the practice of improvisation and/or rational control. This kind of analysis is central to identifying the larger structural functions (which can be ambiguous, admitting multiple possibilities or a pluralism of structures) that constitute the articulation of a narrative shape. It will remain to be seen whether the reader responds to the conclusion that these narrative shapes aid the rejuvenation and relevance of genres dismissed by the high modern—and whether Kagel achieves, at least within the time-space of his pieces, a kind of balanced compatibility between the various upheavals (romantic, modern, postmodern) that have punctuated the recent history of Western culture.

One disclaimer must be mentioned. Because of the sustained complexity of Kagel’s musical approach, as well as his definite role as an artist working within the established avant-garde community, it must be stated that his music is indeed a “specialized” music. I believe his music, because of its multiple “coding” and uncompromising ingenuity, does \textit{not} reach the wider audiences that some postmodern composers are searching to include, and I dare say that his music resists any

\textsuperscript{74}See Heile 2002, 287-9.

\textsuperscript{75}It can be argued that much postmodern technique relies on the extreme treatment of modernist strategies in order to draw attention to itself (e.g., the considerable difference in degree between modernist collage and postmodernist collage); therefore, the notion of “oppositional” may be illusory. This may be a reason why so many of Kagel’s musical surfaces “feel” multilayered yet coherent, despite the simultaneous inclusion of radically different musical constituents.
commodifying conciliation that would aid its “ingestion” by the relatively enlightened, information-saturated Western human who has little training or exposure to concert music. Whatever the existing critical literature may have to say about the function and/or purpose of the contemporary avant-garde composer (situated within this “era” of postmodernity) and the debate surrounding elitism, it is a subject that is beyond the scope of this thesis to address. It will be avoided not because it is unimportant (it is a vitally important issue), but because it is irrelevant to the goals of this thesis. Despite this writer’s desires of communicating to a wider spectrum of humanity, it must be conceded that understanding this music, as the following analysis will show, demands a great deal of musical knowledge (especially of Romantic and contemporary repertories and their stylistic properties) in order to be experienced to the fullest; again, this reflects Barthes’s insistence that readers (listeners) must construct the intent of a “text.” If this thesis and its analyses generate a little more interest in Kagel within the highly specialized field of contemporary concert music, it will have performed its function.
PART II

THE SOLO PIANO MUSIC—ANALYSIS OF FOUR WORKS
CHAPTER 3

METAPIECE (MIMETICS) [1961]

Exploring Indeterminacy and Performer Choice

Of the five solo piano pieces Kagel has written to date, Metapiece relates the most to the earlier compositional period defined in chapter one. It is one of Kagel’s more obscure early works, yet it contains some seeds that point to aspects of his later style. Because of its mostly graphical-modular appearance and long list of specific instructions, this work reflects many of the same strategies found in Transición II from 1958-9.76 The piece consists of page-length sections of largely aleatoric music (all of which require considerable interpretation), the order of which is left up to the discretion of the performer. The music is written upon one long, continuous “concertina-like” score, which may be folded and unfolded to reveal different combinations of pages. Also, not all of the pages need be performed. In addition to this freedom within the piece, the score explains that the piece can be programmed in a number of different ways: (1) piano solo, (2) piano solo interrupted by other works on the same program but continues on after the interrupting work is over (implying that the work can truly function on a meta-level, beyond the usual conditions of a work’s beginning and ending in concert culture), (3) piano solo performed simultaneously with other piano works by Kagel or another living

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76 See pp. 8-10 above for a discussion of Transición II.
composer, or (4) piano solo that is performed alternately and/or simultaneously with other works (of differing instrumentation if desired) by Kagel or another living composer. If the performer chooses the third or fourth format, the title of the piece is rearranged in the program to read *Mimetics (Metapiece)*. Kagel also permits the piece to be played on two pianos or with four hands if desired, and the possibility of incorporating other keyboard instruments also exists. Even placing foreign objects (“stones of different sizes”) on the keyboard or strings is suggested, with no apparent concern for where they are placed.\footnote{These instructions can be found in English in the score; see Kagel, *Metapiece (Mimetics) für Klavier 1961* (London: Universal Edition, 1971), III.}

Despite this almost overwhelming array of freely chosen elements, Kagel’s instructions contain a detailed legend explaining precisely how to decode and process the signs constituting the entirety of the score.\footnote{Ibid., IV.} The piece is designed to incorporate indeterminacy in certain elements, but all the while requiring exacting specificity in others. Each page begins with the standard notation of a letter-labeled chord, followed by one “system” of signs (which are to be read left to right) that instructs how the performer is to continue structuring the music in performance. A detailed tour through the first page will help to clarify this process.

Figure 2 (p. 50) is a reduction of the first page of the score. The pianist is to play all the notes of the chord (in successions of maximum simultaneous notes if large stretches are required); in this case, a widely-spaced D, C#, and B. The first sign of brackets indicates that the pianist is to choose one note from the first chord, then play it softly with a tenuto staccato articulation. The next sign of brackets indicates that the
pianist is to choose two notes from chord A, play them extremely soft (the square around the \( p \) signifies “extremely”), and portato, catching the residue of leftover sound with the damper pedal. The pianist must then depress the sostenuto (middle) pedal (signified by the double “PP”) while holding down the damper pedal, catching all of the dampers in the above-the-string position. The third set of brackets indicates an extremely forte version of all three notes of chord A, which will then sustain due to the depressed sostenuto pedal. Kagel’s next sign, the beamed x’s (usually indicative of unspecified pitch), represents his instruction of allowing the strings to rattle (“Saitenklirren nicht vermeiden”) as the slow-rising sostenuto pedal (“Pedal sehr langsam loslassen”) makes the return of the dampers erratic and noisy. The last sign on the page instructs the player to depress one note from chord A silently (the diamond-shaped notehead) while striking a grace-note length
chromatic cluster in any register, resulting in any one of multiple possibilities of string resonance coming from the silently held note. The timing of this set of gestures should correspond roughly to the spatial proportions of the score, though no overall tempo is set to govern this. For instance, if the performer decides that one page is to take about two minutes to play, one interpretation could be to play the four indeterminate gestures (after the initial chord) at 0’40”, 0’50”, 1’15”, and 1’35”, respectively.79

Within this first page of relatively simple instructions, there is already a kind of “catalogue” of standard avant-garde sound procedures used on the piano at this time in the ‘60s. The large patches of silence, sharply contrasted articulations and dynamics, electronic-sounding pedal and resonant effects, and the tight focus of musical materials (despite the presence of indeterminacy) typify the kind of gestures found in the piano music by Boulez, Berio, Stockhausen (especially Klavierstück VII [1954]), and other Darmstadt composers. This may be one way the subtitle of “mimetics” works in relation to the title of “metapiece.” The work mimics other piano works of the time in its sonic approach, but its indeterminate nature allows it to function on the meta-music level (a work that contains the potential of an infinite number of possible realizations).

If one looks through the rest of the score in page order (for a total of thirteen pages), there is an explicit progression of complexity and integration as each page introduces a new chord to be worked into the fabric of the musical surface. Indeed, the entire piece is a working-out of the possibilities of transforming and recombining the thirteen total chords (A through M) used in the piece. At the beginning of page 2, chord B

79It is interesting that each page of the score is exactly 24 centimeters wide. Though this may be purely coincidental, when this is mapped onto the time frame of two minutes, it easily follows to “subdivide” each page into neat five-second intervals. This is how these timings were chosen. It would be a question of performance practice to determine whether this would be an appropriate method for timing this work.
(the lowest B-flat on the piano and the highest F) is sounded, followed by six gestures. Some of these gestures combine chord A (from the first page) and chord B. Similarly, page 3 combines chord C (a massive 12-note chord that spans over six octaves) with chords A and B, and the graphical gestures include wider varieties of interacting signs.
(e.g., dividing large chords into smaller successive ones, accelerating and slowing of tempo, overlapping and asynchronous pedal and dynamic shapes).

The gradual one-by-one integration of all previous chords continues to develop over the course of the rest of the pages. Figure 3 (p. 52) shows page 8, a good example of Kagel’s explosive treatment of materials at the mid-point of the score. It is immediately obvious that a realization of the instructions on this page means a serious and committed effort on the part of the performer, if it is to be done with any sense of true integrity. Chord H begins the page, and the following gestures involve multifariously transformed conglomerations of the previous chords (A through G). Kagel does provide, no doubt as a courtesy to the performer, the note-content of any chord below the performance system, vertically aligned with the placement of chord letter in the top system. Thus, the top system is the actual performance instruction, and the bottom system serves as the chord “legend,” providing a reminder of the reservoir of pitches for each particular chord.

Dissection of the third gesture on this page (using chords A, D, and H) at this point will illuminate the challenge facing the performer in realization. It is helpful to consider a loose Schenkarian approach, structuring the musical surface into a foreground and middleground; also for clarity the letter-labeled chords will now be referenced with the descriptor “harmonic field.” The west-east arrows above the harmonic field letters ADH mean that they may be used in any order in the middleground (e.g., DHA, HAD, or AHD are all legitimate possibilities). Over the course of unfolding these harmonic fields in the middleground, the performer must slow down (indicated by the descending arrow). In realization, the performer must actually play six sub-chords (indicated by the six noteless stems connected to the beam), each of which is made up of three notes picked
randomly from the larger reservoir of fields A, D, and H (indicated by the number “3” above the first noteless stem). These six trichords would make up the foreground, or actual musical surface, that would be heard in performance. Also, Kagel demands that the dynamic shape be specified at the middleground level, which is specifically tied to each harmonic field. For example, one could play two pianissimo trichords selected from field H, follow it with one forte chord built from field A (field A is only three notes anyway), and then play three piano trichords from field D, all the while executing a rallentando.

As the complexity and specificity of the graphical signs increase with each new page, so does the amount of possible interpretations available to the performer. Kagel blithely recommends a transcription for page 13 (see Figure 4 on p. 55), the last page of the score, “in view of the number and complexity of possible interpretations.”80 There can be little doubt that most performers attempting this score might desire a transcription of more than just the final page of music.

On page 13, the final new chord or harmonic field (M) is introduced, followed by a bracketing of signs indicating the inclusion of all the harmonic fields used in the piece. The performer may use the fields in any order (indicated by the A through M sign above which lies the double-headed east-west arrow), though the number of sounds from each field is to be repeated a specific number of times (indicated by the number to the right of each field letter in the bottom-system “legend”). The performer is also required to articulate fifty percent of the material in staccato touch and the other fifty percent in legato touch, while also dividing the material evenly into the four terraced dynamic levels

80Kagel 1971, III.
Kagel uses in this piece. Needless to say, the rational idea for a performer concerned with honest intent would be to pursue a personalized transcription of this final page.
Kagel’s exploration of performer choice in this work demonstrates a ferocious attempt to stretch the performer’s musical-organizational capacities as far as humanly possible, beyond the requirements of many other so-called indeterminate works. The irony of demanding an almost preposterous level of instructional specificity within the format of indeterminate musical coding is representative of Kagel’s radical compositional stance at this time. It is possible to view this work as simply a big joke, but as the following commentary will show, it can also be viewed as a politically charged indictment of high-modern conformism. Kagel may have been portentous in seeing that compositional practice in new avant-garde music, which through twelve-tone “emancipated material” was at first ultimately an expression of true freedom, eventually became its antithesis—a high-modernist ethos that at its extreme end rendered composers’ works of similar instrumentation virtually indistinguishable from one another. What Adorno called new music’s “revocation of the collective agreement” (referring to the universality of tonal practice) ironically became after some time a collective agreement—a tacit consensus between composers to push the hierarchical relationships between musical parameters to ultimate levels. Though undoubtedly a product of avant-garde culture, *Metapiece* exposes an ironic, subversive spin from within the elite community of that culture.

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Analysis: Repetition vs. Saturation

Though the nature of this piece defies any kind of traditional formal analysis in terms of what happens over time from beginning to end, it is possible to attempt a somewhat localized analysis. The goal here is an illumination of the tension between material that is repetitive in an obvious sense and material that is differentiated in an extreme way, to the point of an experience of saturation. In this context, transformation (loosely defined here as any technique that rearticulates a musical fragment into a variant form, which must maintain some level of aural relationship to the original) of harmonic field material occurs throughout the piece, though aural resemblances are obliterated as multiple harmonic fields are combined and manipulated. The tension between repetition and saturated transformation forms an oppositional element and allows for the articulation of a dramatic interplay.

There are two general methods by which Kagel achieves recognizable aural repetition in this work, one much more obvious than the other. Concerning the latter, Kagel’s harmonic fields (A through M) are repeated in varying degrees of recognizability throughout the pages of Metapiece. As stated above, this occurs more or less in the “middleground” of the piece, which should be obvious from a few glances at Figures 2 through 4. The more obvious method of generating repetitive material occurs directly on the surface; it is a performer-chosen event described by Kagel in his set of instructions:

2.6 Obsessive-sounding repetitions of short fragments can be included, even when there are no repeat signs. Rapid mechanical rhythms (like those of a cracked record) with slight aperiodic alterations could be attempted. The repetitions should take place at will, without any preparatory break.82

82Kagel 1971, III.
In other words, the performer may break up the relative unpredictability of the musical texture with an attention-grabbing (it must, after all, sound “obsessive”) miniature ostinato. Rather than asking for strict rhythmic repetitiveness, Kagel would welcome “slight aperiodic alterations” in the performer’s improvisation of such an “ostinato.”

It is important to state at this point that Kagel’s brief instruction note concerning these repetitions also accurately describes in a general sense the figuration style found in his later music. It will be shown, in the forthcoming analyses of all of his later piano music, that sections of obsessive-sounding fragments or figures repeated with slight alterations will become an exemplary trait of Kagel’s music. In Metapiece it is up to the performer to improvise these repetitions along with their altered variants; but in all the later music, Kagel will control them with ultra-specific notation.

Of course a given performer could choose to avoid Kagel’s suggestion for repetitive figuration. However, the work becomes much more interesting and dramatic if this idea is realized. This analysis will assume the pianist’s willful indulgence of the interpolation suggestion.

The pianist has full control over how deeply imbedded the sense of repetitiveness will be within the overall texture. Most of the early pages contain many harmonic field repeats, and the first page utilizes only the three notes from chord A. The later pages become more and more saturated with new harmonic fields and possible realizations. Here is a table summary of the field arrays given for each page:

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83A letter standing alone represents one gesture within that harmonic field. Any letters joined together represents a gesture utilizing the constituent harmonic fields in some type of combination. Letters within parentheses indicate other amalgamations; see individual descriptions in the table.
Table 1. Field arrays in *Metapiece*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Page)</th>
<th>(Fields)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>B A AB AB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>C B C A ABC B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>D ABC D ABC C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>E D E C B A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>F F ABD F CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>G G (BD, inserted into G gesture) A (BD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>H EFG ADH B C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I FHAEBCDG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>J (A through I, combined vertically)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>K (A through J, ordered)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>L AJL CG DIL BK EL FH CGDI AEJL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>M (A through M, unordered)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If the pianist chooses the hypothetical arrangement of playing pages 1, 2, 3, 5, 4, and 6 in that order (which is fully allowable under Kagel’s instructions), then the sense of repetition will be more present and easier to hear, since those pages make use of many of the same harmonic fields. Or, the pianist could simply play pages 8, 12, and 10, ensuring that the listener will be hard pressed to extrapolate any kind of harmonic field repetition. The later pages also contain far more convoluted methods of combining and exploding the constituent harmonic fields, so it is more than possible that absolutely no sense of repetition will be sensed. The only possible mitigation of this kind of total saturation would be a well-placed obsessive-sounding repetition trope. But again, it would be up to the performer to decide how much or how little to employ this technique.

Any transformation really only occurs at the gesture level, in which harmonic fields are used as reservoirs from which many different realizations are possible. Many methods are offered for articulating these gestures, examples of which were given in the pages above. Another way to articulate how transformation is utilized in this work is to
isolate one particular field and see how Kagel develops gestures throughout the score for a specific harmonic field.

Harmonic field D (which is shown in Figure 3) first appears on page 4 and consists of a widely spaced chordal harmony consisting of notes D♭-E♭-F-E-D-G, spread from the bottom of the keyboard up to the top octave. When a chord (or new harmonic field) first appears, it is to be played as a succession of chords that are chosen by considering the maximum number of notes that can be played simultaneously. For example, field D could be played in as little as two chordal gestures: In the first, the left hand could play bass notes D♭ and E♭ and the right-hand treble notes E and D. Then the second chordal gesture would consist of the two leftover notes, bass F and the highest treble G (g''), played, respectively, by the left and right hands. On page 5, each of the notes of field D is to be played separately, in a quick pointillist-staccato style with no pedal. This gesture is an example of a relatively straightforward transformation. Field D comes back again combined with fields A and B on page 6, combined with field B only on page 7, and combined with fields A and H on page 8. In these variants, transformation would be inaudible due to the combination of harmonic fields, thereby contributing to a sense of saturated differentiation. By the last couple pages, field D is combined with all the other harmonic fields in the scope of a larger formal gesture, during which the experience of field D (or, for that matter, any of the other fields) as an individual entity is completely eradicated.

It seems that Kagel is trying to achieve through these wild collections of signs and combinatorial antics an imitation not just of the sounds and colors of avant-garde music, but also of the *compositional* techniques used by serial composers, techniques that would
be in vogue at the time of this composition. Through the recycling of field materials, the performer would be in a crude way constructing hierarchical pitch/chord relationships in brief or broad gestures controlled by the graphical notation. Despite the amount of performer choice, Kagel’s level of absurd specificity ensures that the essential conditions for atonal deep structure would permeate the musical syntax, whether or not these properties would be audibly detectable.

_Mimetics: Levels of “Imitation?”_

Based on the analysis from the previous section, Kagel’s title connotes a number of related meanings that are rendered in the realization and performance of this piece. It is “meta-music” in the positive sense that there are an infinite number of possible interpretations, with the score acting as a catalogue of musical formulae. But this work is also consigned as a representation; it is merely mimetic of the avant-garde practices of its day. In a negative sense, the work can be viewed as a critique of the narrowness within post-war composition: Its pages are filled with absurd and impossible requirements, all of which add up to not much more than a mimicry of the dryly demanding “texts” composers generated rather than wrote. The stagnation of avant-garde culture is revealed in its relentless reliance on a conformist grab-bag of “experimental” sounds and gestures, many of which are mocked in this piece.⁸⁴

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⁸⁴The score contains many examples: excessively detailed pedal markings, a preponderance of extreme dynamic contrasts, extra-instrumental sounds (noises from stamping, clapping, or dampers springing back to the piano strings), and randomly complex articulation requirements, to name a few.
Within the unfolding of the music itself, the idea of mimicry can take on an almost mocking character in the event the performer chooses to employ the obsessive-repetitive gesture technique. This idea could be used to imbue a kind of dramatic conflict within the work, because these patterns would certainly interrupt the flow of any carefully structured interpretation of the signs and symbols in the score. The total saturation of field harmonies in the final pages (should the performer choose to play these) would be the polar opposite of a randomly inserted ostinato-like figure. Though the request for small alterations within these improvised figures is related to the transformation of field harmonies, it is a different degree of transformation Kagel desires in these ostinati. It is more intuitive and characteristic of improvisation. The transformations of field harmonies in this work exist in a different sphere; they are indicative of overtly intellectual processes, containing little of the spontaneous spirit required in improvisation.

The work therefore is a good example of Kagel’s sense of ironic displacement: It is at once aesthetically aligned with modernist inclinations (ultra-specific scoring and instructions, contrived unity, developmental processes), yet it undermines itself with freely chosen elements and multiple coding of hierarchical signification. It is postmodern but not antimodern, and its irony is not limited to the piece itself. It is indeed a self-conscious work (how can one reconcile its freedoms with its idiosyncratic demands?) and its questioning of high-modernist values ties it to the aesthetic paradigm of the Conceptual Art movement in the late 1960s. The idea of original expressive intent

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For instance, in page order the work gradually progresses towards complete integration of all the harmonic fields, yet Kagel insists in the instructions that the performer may play just some of the pages and in any order. The performer may recognize this hierarchy and disrupt it, or engage it in the order of gradual progress.
through such a detailed graphical score is challenged by Kagel’s subversive use of freely chosen elements; the actual composition of the “surface” is left to the performer’s whims. Kagel had only concerned himself with forming a blueprint for producing, quite like an assembly line, a wealth of infinite possibilities, most of which would all sound similar in the end anyway. Yet at the same time, Kagel gives the performer the choice to subvert the composer’s own score. Truly this is the most radical element of the piece: The tension between modern and postmodern elements is, like so many other facets of the piece, left to the performer’s sensibilities.
Kagel’s musical language underwent great stylistic change by 1977, and his only piano etude, *An Tasten*, is no exception. His tendency to employ genre subtitles inherited from the past (especially the nineteenth-century past) begins in this decade, and much of this newer music involved a tightening of musical parameters in harmony and texture. There is an absolute return to conventional notation and scoring (opposite the radical *Metapiece* discussed in the previous chapter) as well as a considerable concentration on the sensation of discernible pulse. *An Tasten*, for instance, is a rather long work (approximately sixteen minutes) that employs triadic harmonies almost exclusively throughout; the internal rhythmic structure rendered for the most part in continuous eighth notes. The strict adherence to a simple oscillating repetitive pattern also demonstrates Kagel’s tendency towards minimal gestural differentiation, quite in contrast to the purposeful chaos found in the earlier music. There is a self-conscious narrowness of boundary in Kagel’s etude, yet it is entirely in keeping with the dominant set of expectations associated with etude composition. At the same time, Kagel lengthens and enriches the possibilities for transformation in the etude genre; his realization is at once a genuine effort to capture its essential characteristics while also expanding the number of difficulties the performer should face at a given time in any one etude. These relationships form the basis for a dramatic presentation, and though Kagel limits himself
in certain musical elements (e.g., harmony and gesture), he widens the spectrum of possibilities in others (e.g., dynamics and tempo).

Genre Considerations: Formal and Stylistic Expectations in the Etude

The New Harvard Dictionary of Music defines the etude as “a composition designed to improve the technique of an instrumental performer by isolating specific difficulties and concentrating his or her efforts on their mastery.” Furthermore, the etude “usually focuses on one technical problem,” which is why many composers wrote sets of etudes that covered the advanced technical vocabulary of a given instrument. Not only does the etude encourage the development of technical prowess but also interpretational sophistication (or, more prosaically, “musicality.”) For example, Chopin’s Op. 10 No. 3 etude in E is primarily concerned with melodic voicing and cantabile playing combined with balancing accompanying middle voices. The keyboard etude developed through the nineteenth century from its early incarnations in Clementi and Cramer to the full-scale compositions, or concert etudes, by Chopin, Liszt, and Debussy. Throughout the twentieth century, composers would cultivate the ideals of the concert etude: a study that is not merely an exercise but also a meaningful showpiece deserving of an audience’s attention. It performed the double functions of aesthetic satisfaction as well as intensely focused technical challenge for the performer.

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87 Ibid.
The etudes by Chopin and Liszt often utilized ternary structures that resulted in a different formulation of the technical problem in the contrasting middle section. A good example is Chopin’s famous octave etude (Op. 25 No. 10); its outer sections demand quick and powerful octave playing and the middle section requires delicate and nuanced melodic octaves.

The normative length for keyboard etudes is rather short, few being longer than five or six minutes. (The longer Études d’exécution transcendante by Liszt are a notable exception, some of which last almost ten minutes.) In general, etudes written in the twentieth century continued to be rather brief (e.g., etudes by Debussy, Rachmaninoff, Szymanowski, Ligeti, and Messiaen). However, as time went on, composers began to combine multiple difficulties within one etude, making it difficult to point out just one technical or musical problem. In a sense, this is true also in Chopin’s and Liszt’s etudes, though the twentieth century would produce some of the most densely difficult etudes ever composed. Ligeti’s etudes are fitting examples that provide traditional technical challenges but also provide newer ones such as proficient execution of polyrhythmic complexity.

Kagel’s etude is an interesting case in etude composition. In the following analysis, An Tasten will be construed as fulfilling and expanding the roles of the etude in concert music today.
Analysis: Obsessive Monotony vs. Transformational Diversity

Kagel’s etude is based on sequences of triads that tend to voice-lead smoothly by step. Triads are found in root and inversion positions, and Kagel transforms them through diminished, minor, major, and augmented forms throughout the piece. Figure 5 shows the first two systems of the piece.

Figure 5. Kagel, An Tasten, mm. 1-10

It should be immediately apparent that Kagel’s musical style has been reduced to extremely narrow parameters. The upper two notes of each triad are played alternately in eighth notes, while the bottom notes hold for longer, irregular durations. This motion is too minimal to be one of Kagel’s “musical figures,” but it is convenient to refer to it as a
texture. This monotonous texture is maintained throughout the entire piece in an obsessive manner, made all the more so due to the work’s extended length of sixteen minutes. As in *Metapiece*, the score is prefaced by a list of explanations from Kagel, though it is not at all in the same spirit as the former piece. One interesting comment instructs the performer that the accompaniment is inseparable from the main voice. It is true that either the top line of oscillating eighth notes or the bottom line of longer-held notes could play the role of melody or accompaniment. Their properties are not differentiated enough for a convincing solution either way. It is a form of postmodern double-coding whereby each line plays both roles at once, leaving it to the listener to decide which voice will act as melody or accompaniment.

Other instructions are more prosaic and of a practical nature. Meter signatures are supplanted by numbers found in the middle staff; they indicate the number of quarter note beats for each triadic harmony. If there is to be an uneven number of eighth notes, Kagel indicates the extra half-beat with a smaller number “5” placed next to the larger number of even quarter-note beats. (See Figure 5 on p. 67.) All of this is quite straightforward and consistent, though there seems to be no obvious regularity or pattern in the ever-changing groupings of eighth notes.

Kagel also indicates in his instructions that the performer is to execute a subtle *tenuto* on the first eighth note of each harmony change, though this does not occur consistently. This emphasis occurs during moderate tempos and is usually left out of the faster and *accelerando* sections. The harmony changes themselves over the long term do

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89“Double-coding” is the terminology utilized by architectural critic Charles Jencks; see pp. 29-30 for a general discussion. Its applicability to postmodern musical discourse is clear.
not lend themselves to any traditionally functional syntax; their gentle chromatic motion nevertheless connotes a late-Romantic ambiance. Because a tenuto emphasis occurs for each harmony change, there is a resultant effect of delicate oscillation between tension and resolution at the local level.

Figure 5 demonstrates this quality of subjective tonal suggestion through chordal transformation. For now, it is to be assumed that local changes can be articulated as quasi-functional events. At the beginning of the piece the tonality of D-sharp minor is established. The harmony shifts for one beat to a chromatically neighboring E-diminished triad, then returns to D-sharp minor, solidifying the key for the time being. The next harmony change occurs on a D minor chord with an augmented fifth, which translates to a B-flat major chord. This shift from E-flat minor (enharmonic to D-sharp minor) to B-flat major can suggest a number of possible harmonic functions. On the one hand, the listener may hear the B-flat major chord as the dominant of E-flat minor. On the other hand, the listener may hear the B-flat major chord as tonic, with the previous E-flat minor chord acting as the subdominant in a plagal relationship. Either way, the mood does not last long: One beat later the harmony shifts to B-flat minor (enharmonically written as an F chord with an augmented third and fifth), which may be interpreted either as a change of mode (reminiscent of Schubert) or an instability that could initiate a modulation. However, Kagel disrupts any notions of functionality with a move towards A-minor, leading the lowest note chromatically down to E, and then the upper notes down chromatically to C and A natural in the next beat. The delayed chromatic motion of the upper voices softens the impact of A minor. But three beats later the harmony shifts again, continuing a sequential gesture (where the lower voice first moves down
chromatically, and the upper voices move similarly in the next beat). The sequenced harmony shifts the “key” to G-sharp minor, the use of the traditional device of harmonic sequencing lending a quality of suggestive functionality to the harmony.

This hypothetical aural interpretation would of course be ludicrous to attempt on any large scale, for there seems to be no obvious pattern to the gradual transformation of harmonies in this work. However, due to the slow tempo and the highly connotative power of these local triadic relationships, the listening act is made complicated by these events. While listening to the larger motions may confer an impression of flotation in functionless triad-based harmony, the local shifts can give slight sensations of tension and resolution. Whether Kagel intended this or not is irrelevant, since, to paraphrase Barthes, the reader/listener constructs the meanings of the text/score. Anyone schooled in theories of functional tonality would be capable of experiencing these kinds of subtle relationships.

As the piece progresses, it becomes apparent that larger gestures in the music will affect the listener’s experience–the work is not at all an extremist example of minimalism. After all, what technical challenge is required of the pianist in this etude? It does not seem that the opening bars suggest any more than the moderate challenge of staying in tempo at a soft dynamic. However, other transformations outside of the harmonic element begin in the next few minutes of the piece. Figure 6 (p. 71) shows the second page of An Tasten, where the etude’s true difficulties begin.
The music continues the downward harmonic motion in progress since the opening of the piece. But here Kagel adds a new source of variation: register displacement. While the harmonies between the hands remain in parallel, the material in both hands is moved to a different octave (usually one octave above or below) at different times, in a staggered fashion. At the same time a further challenge is introduced. It is the one that becomes the true difficulty for the performer: different dynamic shapes for the material in each hand. These dynamic shapes are as unpredictable as the harmonic rhythm. He wrote many differing lengths of crescendo and diminuendo throughout this page as well as the rest of the score. Also, he employs some extreme sudden contrasts in dynamics, such as the sudden mezzo-forte in the left hand just after the beginning of page 2. Balancing these requirements is indeed difficult and takes considerable concentrated practice.

As the piece progresses, Kagel builds excitement through the use of more extreme dynamics and lengthy accelerando sections. When the larger gesture has climaxed, Kagel uses almost equally proportioned rallentando or calmandosi sections to bring the listener back down, setting the tempo once again for the next big push. The larger gestures in the music are articulated through differing transformations of the accelerating-climax-slowing tempi formula. At times, the dynamic shapes reinforce the tempo changes (e.g. faster tempi coupled with louder dynamics, slower tempi coupled with softer dynamics), while at other times the dynamic shapes do the opposite. In many cases, the climaxes of the larger gestures are made even more forceful by the uniting of dynamic shape between both hands. In other words, instead of writing different dynamic shapes for each hand at the climax, Kagel writes that both hands are to perform the same crescendo or diminuendo in synchronization.
Taken one at a time, the transformations that occur throughout the various musical elements (harmony, register, dynamics, and tempo) are fairly traditional and easy to execute. It is the way in which Kagel combines the transformed elements that makes the piece difficult. Long, drawn-out tempo changes over many bars coincide with unpredictable harmonic changes, register displacements, and discrete dynamic shapes. These simultaneous demands for detailed execution in each domain are the challenges that beset the performer in this etude. The performer’s mastery of these techniques may be most applicable in Kagel’s other keyboard music, in the same way Chopin’s etudes seem to aid the performer most when attempting a technical understanding of other works by Chopin. The fact that Kagel’s later piano writing continues to explore these types of challenges (while adding further complications such as polyrhythm) reinforces this notion.

At this point it would be appropriate to supply a table outlining the work’s general formal scheme. The work is split into sections that reflect the larger tempo-change gestures, a means that seems most logical for this piece. The table reveals a tempo “tonic” for the work at metronome marking 112, though the overall form falls into a rough arch. It begins slowly, speeds up in several stages to the ultimate fast tempo of 210, and then drops back down again for a slow coda. A general description of each subsection’s content is given, in order to make clear Kagel’s slight variations in texture.
Table 2. Formal scheme in *An Tasten*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Bar Numbers</th>
<th>Tempo Status (beats per minute)</th>
<th>General Description of Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1-42</td>
<td>MM=58 (steady)</td>
<td>Chords move down chromatically from D#-minor to D-augmented, held tones in lower voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>43-55</td>
<td>MM=58→170 (accelerating)</td>
<td>Eventual stabilization on D♭-minor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>56-77</td>
<td>MM=170 (steady)</td>
<td>Downward chromatic movement, settles into tighter movement around lower chord tones G-A♭-A-C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>78-99</td>
<td>MM=170→112 (slowing)</td>
<td>Upward chromatic movement from E-major to G-major.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B(1)</td>
<td>100-115 MM=112→144 (accel.)</td>
<td>Tight neighbor-motion around lower chord tones C-C#-D-D#-E-F.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>116-131 MM=144→96 (slowing)</td>
<td>Chromatic movement in lower chord tones from A through F# (up and down motion.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B(2)</td>
<td>132-134 MM=96→144 (accel.)</td>
<td>Settles on E (second inversion of A-minor.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>135-143 MM=144→112 (slowing)</td>
<td>Chromatic movement downwards, held tones switch between lower and upper voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>144-154 MM=112 (steady, but rall. in bar 153.)</td>
<td>B♭-sus4 chord (first appearance of non-triadic chord); left hand moves in oblique motion to right hand, creating clashing dissonance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>155-166 <em>Subito</em> MM=156 (steady)</td>
<td>Left hand moves back to parallel motion at the octave, unison with the right hand. Downward chromatic motion, A down to D♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>167-186 MM=156→112 (slowing)</td>
<td>Downward chromatic motion, C down to G.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>187-189 MM=112→? (accel.)</td>
<td>Settles on G♭, trills between notes D♭ and E♭ gradually speed up at different times between the hands, <em>senza misura</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>190-237 MM=184 (steady, but <em>stringendo</em> in bar 237.)</td>
<td>Marked “Grandioso,” with meandering chromatic movement from G up to E♭.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>238-264 MM=136, 190 (<em>subito</em>)</td>
<td>Upward chromatic movement to G#.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>265-269 MM=190→172 (slowing)</td>
<td>Downward chromatic motion to B.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>270-292</td>
<td>MM=172→210 (accel, then steady at bar 276.)</td>
<td>Repeated notes on G#, back to chordal texture in bar 276. Repeated notes, trills, chordal textures in rapid alternation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>293-353</td>
<td>MM=210→144→96→68 (slowing, with points of terraced tempo arrivals.)</td>
<td>Motion sometimes chromatic but often in wider leaps, upward and downward. Triadic texture predominates. Section ends with both hands playing blocked triads, softly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>354-366</td>
<td>MM=48 (“Grave”)</td>
<td>Coda begins with pedal A-minor chord pulsations in root position, right hand playing a wandering line in sixths.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>367-372</td>
<td>MM=48</td>
<td>Right hand plays treble pedal on A-diminished, left hand with line in sixths.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>373-386</td>
<td>Pochissimo meno mosso</td>
<td>Back to chordal texture in parallel motion, harmony centered around A-minor. Left hand plays melody in sixths, bars 382-385.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>387-391 (end)</td>
<td>Pochissimo più mosso</td>
<td>Both hands play single-line melody, in counterpoint. Piece ends with “cadence” motion in the last two bars: C-minor triad in root position moves to a D-augmented triad in root position.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is interesting how Kagel limits the material to a most basic nucleus (pulsating notes of the triad), yet manages to yield a wide amount of diversity and continuous development with his transformational techniques. The obsession with a monotonous texture over a period of time is successfully tempered with Kagel’s endlessly creative variations. Werner Klüppelholz has written that the work is much like an indefinable cadenza of extensive length. The table above certainly illustrates a possible formal layout for an extended cadenza that exhibits a vigorous ebb and flow and sectional variety. It is another form of double-coding: Kagel’s piano etude is endowed with the scope and dramatic impact of a cadenza.

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90 This seems to be the meaning intended by the word “Kadenz” in the passage cited, though it could also mean “cadence.” It could be argued that he does mean “cadence” here but I will choose to interpret it as “cadenza.” Werner Klüppelholz, *Mauricio Kagel 1970-1980* (Köln: Dumont, 1981), 142.
Dramatic Implications

It has been demonstrated through the previous sections of this chapter how Kagel has reinvigorated the compositional notion of the etude, obviously bearing in mind what it means to continue the tradition. While in some ways Kagel breaks with tradition in his composition (e.g. unusually long length, cadenza-like formal scheme), his main efforts lie in continuing and expanding the genre for the performer’s (and the audience’s) benefit. He requires precise detail in dynamic shaping and tempo control at the local level, while at the same time demanding that the performer be capable of sustaining larger musical gestures.

*An Tasten* is remarkably dramatic because Kagel instills a slight twist on the idea of the etude: Instead of focusing on one technical problem, Kagel centers upon one particular texture. The numerous technical problems inherent in his etude (heterophonic dynamic shaping, tempo control, rhythmic irregularities, etc.) are largely by-products of the compositional tension between monotony and diversity, and have little to do with the physicality of playing broken triads. The texture is a template that allows Kagel to develop the music in unexpected ways. Once again, Kagel has maintained a dialectical balance between two extremes: The piece is at once obsessively monotonous yet absolutely diverse; every bar is different from every other bar. No gesture ever repeats exactly, and the larger gestures are as varied as the smaller ones.

Modernist tendencies in this work include unity (strict triadic harmony and repetitive eighth-note motion), hierarchical structuring (arch forms within arch forms), and fierce complexity and independence in musical vocabulary. Kagel’s postmodernist
tendencies come from a number of different directions; he evokes an older genre, develops a fluid expressivity, eschews saturated dissonance for a more nuanced disruption of consonance—and the work suggests characteristics of older Western canonic music (e.g., by Liszt, Mahler, Debussy.) But even here the work is most assuredly not antimodern, because Kagel does not return to functional tonality nor does he abandon the modernist ideal of complexity for its own sake. Indeed, the work is also a study on the relational balance between simplicity and complexity. Therefore, among the solo piano works *An Tasten* is the beginning of Kagel’s integrational postmodernism, as opposed to the antagonistic postmodernism found in *Metapiece.*

*An Tasten*, which could mean “at (piano) keyboard” (or “on keyboard”), “on (about) touch,” or possibly “(a discourse) about keys,” stands in absolute contrast to the graphical aberrations of *Metapiece*. The title could suggest Kagel’s newfound fondness for piano writing that is strictly limited to the traditional area of the keyboard, rather than the scoring for non-keyboard piano effects such as those found in *Transición II*. It could also refer to the possible idea of a new treatise “on keyboard,” the etude operating as a proxy essay on the possibilities of keyboard writing outside of the high modernist culture. Additionally, one could interpret the title to mean “on (about) touch,” which implicates dynamic control and tastefulness as the etude’s foremost technical challenge. Finally, the title could also refer to the rhetorical expressiveness of the work: “a discourse about keys” in which the local connotations of harmonic functionality act as “arguments.” These multiple meanings connote the romantic and contemporary eras and lend the work its postmodern sense of historical haziness. The work stands as the entry point in a new

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91See p. 21 for my initial statement on these distinctions in Kagel’s musical output.

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era of solo piano writing for Kagel. His next two pieces for solo piano also reinvigorate romantic-era genres that display a bold implementation of new triad-based harmonic paradigms. But they also raise many more questions regarding musical drama, transformation, and reconciling the modern with the postmodern.
CHAPTER 5

À DEUX MAINS (IMPROMPTU FÜR KLAVIER) [1995]

Though this impromptu postdates the rhapsody by a few years, I have decided to place the discussion of the rhapsody after the impromptu analysis for a number of reasons. The impromptu is much shorter and therefore easier to grasp analytically. It provides a pithy application of Kagel’s transformational musical figures, while the same process in Kagel’s rhapsody is much more involved and complex. Lastly, the impromptu not only explores the kind of non-functional triadic harmony found in An Tasten, but also reconfigures that other basic element of the old functional tonal system: the whole/half step scalar pattern. The rhapsody also involves a much more integrated approach in this regard, so it is left for the next chapter.

Just Two Hands: Implied Meanings of the Title

The title À deux mains, taken literally, means “with both hands” or “for two hands.” There is also the possibility for a sly double entendre: The pronunciation is close enough to the phrase à demain, which means “see you tomorrow.” The work is subtitled “impromptu,” and it does bear resemblances to impromptus of the past (especially Chopin’s) while broadening the scope of expectations associated with the impromptu
genre. The broad implications of the title’s literal meaning and the genre designation impromptu have important connections to the dramatic activity of the music.

Works for the piano are obviously usually written for both hands. However, in this case, Kagel seems to draw from his own title a rule he strictly observes throughout the entire composition: Both hands play together at all times without respite, mostly in a strict, two-voice contrapuntal style. The dynamic treatment of the two voices reinforces their independence and equality. Recalling the technique he used in An Tasten, Kagel challenges the performer to articulate utterly different and highly detailed dynamic shapes between the hands. Thus, the title À deux mains is at once a statement for a strict compositional style and an argument for the dramatic exploration of a fluctuating equality of voices.

Genre Considerations: Expectations in the Impromptu

The subtitle “Impromptu” invites a comparison to older models to see if there are any common traits. There are a few stylistic correspondences between Kagel’s work and an impromptu by Chopin. Chopin utilized a strict two-voice technique in perhaps the most famous impromptu, the op. 66 Fantaisie-Impromptu. In Figure 7 (Chopin’s Fantaisie-Impromptu, mm. 21-9) the presence of two fast-moving voices, similar to Kagel’s treatment, is clearly evident. The New Harvard Dictionary of Music describes the impromptu as a composition “in an offhand or extemporized style…perhaps intended to
suggest the result of sudden inspiration."\(^9^2\) Chopin’s left-hand material provides harmonic structure while the right hand “improvises” melodic elaboration. Here, the two compositional techniques most discernible are the use of constant polyrhythm (three triplets against four sixteenths) and the repetition of patterns. Chopin also intends the projection of a melody by accenting the top notes of the right-hand pattern. Kagel’s impromptu, on the other hand, is composed in such a manner as to suggest that both voices are improvisatory. Figure 8 (Kagel, mm. 91-3, 106-8) reveals Kagel’s use of polyrhythm and pattern-repetition, though his approach contains less predictable patterns than Chopin’s. Note that this figure contains two separate systems of music, mm. 91-3 followed by mm. 106-8.

\(^{92}\)Randel 1986, 391.
In mm. 91-2, the right and left hands are bound in an octave range, each playing a contour pattern consisting of four notes with non-repeated inner notes. The constant polyrhythm Kagel employs here is five against six, which results in an impressively chaotic texture. In mm.106-8 the left hand plays an accompaniment similar to Chopin’s left-hand figuration in mm. 25-6 of Figure 7, but Kagel chose to cast his six-note pattern in septuplets, which when set against the sextuplet rhythms of the right hand induces a sensation of two close tempi occurring at once.

Another comparison can be made in terms of form. The common form for most impromptus, i.e., Chopin’s and Schubert’s, is ternary. The “Fantaisie-Impromptu” is in a clear ternary structure with coda; the A section is in a fast tempo and the B section in a slow tempo. The return of the A section begins with exactly the same material as the first A section. The coda contains a partial restatement of the theme from the B section, albeit in augmentation, then the work closes quietly. Therefore, this ternary structure allows a
framework within which an extemporization can take place. In other words, the form aids in grounding the larger motions of this composed improvisation.

Does this kind of structure exist in Kagel’s work? If it does, then how is form articulated and how does he create a sense of contrast between sections? Furthermore, how does Kagel’s impromptu communicate a sense of improvisation spurred by “sudden inspiration”?

Analysis: Musical Figures and Improvisational Qualities

Answers to the questions above require an examination of Kagel’s treatment of musical material. The impromptu is not functionally tonal (as is the case in An Tasten) nor is there any obvious adherence to any strict serial techniques. Kagel’s compositional structures in this work involve something else in terms of formal organization: the “musical figure.” The recognition of a work’s musical figures and how they are transformed allows the listener to apprehend the work’s formal structure and its unifying principles. In this way Kagel’s figures are important from the modernist perspective of coherence.

Figure 9 (mm. 1-18) provides a clear illustration of a musical figure in Kagel’s impromptu. In the first three measures of the work, the right hand plays descending tetrascales in a pattern of an eighth note followed by triplet sixteenths; the left hand plays ascending pentascales in a similar pattern of an eighth note followed by a group of four thirty-second notes. The consistency of contrary motion and note range is apparent, yet

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93 The reader is encouraged to refer to pp. 3-4 for a refreshment of the central ideas behind Kagel’s musical figures.
Kagel transforms the interval content of each scale from one beat to the next. Many combinations of whole steps and half steps are explored, conveying to the listener a consistent texture attended by an immediate surface unpredictability. At the end of the first system, the work’s first wide melodic leap (which is also another musical figure) is
encountered in the right hand; it has a pronounced effect due to the relative stability of
the opening material. The rhythmic reversal in m. 3 plus the arrival on a long note signals
the closure of the phrase. The essence of this opening phrase cannot be called a motive,
because the interval content and note length is never fixed. It also cannot be called a
melody, since the repetition of patterns does not allow for a conventional, easily
perceived melodic arc. Furthermore, there is no one steady state that the musical figure
embodies; it is always in flux, making it impossible to identify a specific set of pitches
and/or rhythms that represent the exact identity of a “prime form” of the material.
Therefore, a useful term for this undulating phenomenon is “musical figure.”

The processes of these figures can be most accurately described as
“transformational” since the figures are not transposed strictly nor do they share an exact
length of notes. However, a close look at the pitches of the first phrase does reveal a strict
control of the material. In the first three measures of Figure 9, Kagel manipulates the
right-hand space from treble b’ up to e’’ in myriad ways. In the first measure, the
downward interval step pattern of half-whole-whole in the first beat (E-D#-C#-B) is
inverted to whole-whole-half in the second beat (E-D-C-B). In the second measure, Kagel
introduces symmetrical constructions into the figure; the first beat contains a pattern of
whole-half-whole (E-D-C#-B) and the second beat contains a shifted pattern of half-
whole-half (F-E-D-C#). At the end of the phrase in m. 3, Kagel reiterates the opening
version of the figure, (E-D#-C#-B), providing a symmetrical construction to the entire
phrase. Though when played at tempo this fast-paced material seems to be in a constantly
wandering flux, there is a carefully crafted compositional scheme. This initial phrase
provides the essential germination of the transformational procedures utilized throughout this work.

The intensity of transformation increases in the ensuing phrases, all of which are subject to variation through transformation. In mm. 4-7 the second phrase is varied with a new layer of transformation: The left hand plays an occasional triplet and/or descending scale. Also, the melodic leap at the end of the phrase occurs in the left hand. The tendencies of the right hand are absorbed into the activity of the left, signifying growth of the material. The third phrase in mm. 8-11 is varied further, and the ending gesture is lengthened and given its own slower tempo. In the fourth phrase, the entire context is warped considerably. There is a change of register, a wash of sustain pedal, and a sudden dynamic change to forte. The three-measure Andantino possesses overlapping functions: On the one hand, it is the extended ending gesture of the fourth phrase; on the other hand it is a new miniature section combining the melodic potential of scalar tetrachords with the contour of wide leaps.

This detailed tour of the first page supplies a framework within which to interpret the contents of the rest of the piece and to eventually conceive a form for the work. As shown by the brief Andantino at the end of page one, Kagel invents new material through the combination of previously isolated musical figures. In Figure 10 (mm. 33-40), just a bit later in the piece, the left hand plays the familiar scales in the bass against right-hand sustained notes in mm. 35-9. These long notes are mingled with grace notes, which have now become scalar tetrachords themselves. As the work progresses further, the combinations of more musical figures gradually expands intervals vertically. For instance, in the beginning of Figure 11 (see p. 88), the scalar figure undergoes
considerable transformation in the right hand, but by m. 64 and beyond, the musical fabric is riddled with wider melodic leaps that stem from broken chordal figures used earlier in the piece. This is one method Kagel uses to achieve drama: As the music builds to a climax, the actual contour of the musical lines becomes much more amplified and the lines cover more registral space. Kagel’s scalar patterns gradually transform into undulations of triad-based arpeggiations, congealed into harmony through the use of the sustain pedal. On the other hand, Kagel does the exact opposite in the final climax of the piece. In Figure 12 (see p. 89, mm. 120-31), the final climax of the impromptu begins at m. 122. The right hand plays highly chromatic combinations of four- and five-note scales against a tight duple-rhythm left-hand harmony of bell-tones. As the climax reaches a ferocious level in m. 128, the registral space is confined to the space of a fifth and there is a complete absence of wide melodic leaps. The initial musical figure from the beginning of the work is, in a sense, “untransformed” and brutally repeated over and over. Frozen in
this small space, the scalar figure’s relentless repetition counteracts the transformational process and grounds the piece for closure. Thus, from a bird’s eye view, the

Figure 11. Kagel, *À deux mains*, mm. 59-73

transformational processes emanate an arch form, reflecting the symmetries of the figure manipulation in the opening of the work. Each half of the arch constitutes one large section. In the first half of the arch, from mm. 1-81, Kagel begins with the scalar musical
figure and transforms the texture to wider leaps and larger registral spaces, often creating triad-based harmony. In the second half, mm. 91-131, this wider space is gradually reduced until the climax is reached in m. 128, where the registral space has been funneled down to a small area. When the leftover sections of music, one from mm. 82-90 and the other from m. 131 to the end, are considered within the context of this arch form, a remarkable formal similarity to the structure in Chopin’s “Fantaisie-Impromptu” arises. The first half of the arch constitutes an A section of moderate to fast music. The B section, m. 82-90, is marked Grave, being the slowest section of the piece. The second half of the arch is the A’ section (mm. 91-143), since much of the material from the first A section is explored and transformed further. The coda of Kagel’s impromptu (mm. 144-56) functions like Chopin’s coda; the coda is related, but not quite exactly, to the material in the B section, and the work closes quietly.

While the character of improvisation is suggested by the composer’s inventive treatment of the initial musical figure, another part of the drama unfolds in the domain of rhythm. Kagel creates contrast and motion through the aspect of polyrhythm. The extent to which polyrhythmic complexity is increased relates directly to the intensity of the energy of forward motion. On the other hand, when the rhythm is relatively more unified and stable, the music reaches a point of climax or stability. In other words, sections of intense polyrhythm define areas of development or motion, while sections of even rhythm define areas of arrival. Figure 13 (mm. 74-90) shows the climax of the first large “A” section and the subsequent “Grave” section. Earlier in the work, mm. 59-63, there are some moments of polyrhythm (i.e., 8:5 in m. 59 and 4:3 in m. 61) similar to those which occurred in the beginning of the work. (Please see Figure 11 on p. 88.)
This polyrhythm between the hands propels this section forward into the *cedendo* of m. 63. The energy of the music drops down in mm. 64-77 because of more sparse writing.
and the change to the slower “Andantino” tempo. The tension then rises in this section as the left-hand ostinato in quintuplet rhythm alternates with the faster-moving sets of compound triplet thirty-second notes in the right hand. Finally, the climax of motion and simultaneous polyrhythm happens in mm. 77-9 (Figure 13), where the left hand plays quintuplets against the right-hand compound triplets (9:5), the most complex polyrhythm in this piece. The straight syncopated rhythms of the brief transition immediately stabilize the chaotic momentum and smoothly guide a dissipating energy into the “Grave” section. This section achieves more tranquility as the rhythmic subdivision slows from triple to duple. The simple, brooding quarter- and half-note melody add to the stability of this section (especially when compared to the previous section). It is also interesting to note the quasi-perfect authentic cadence in B-flat which occurs in mm. 87-8. Although at first glance this may seem terribly out of place in a composition such as this, Kagel borrows from the language of tonality in a fitting way. The cadence occurs at the close of the section, and its seeming finality is appropriate for the context.

Dramatic Implications

The questions from p. 83 have been answered. First, a basic structure does exist in this work; it is articulated by transformational processes and gives rise to an arch form, from which a ternary structure with coda can be extrapolated. Second, Kagel creates contrast by manipulating many parameters; implied harmony (scalar patterns vs. triadic formulations), polyrhythmic complexity, numerous tempo changes, dynamic changes, and the alterations of registral spaces and interval content all contribute to sectional
contrast. Lastly, the exploratory development of the scalar figure and other figures constitutes the dramatic impact of “sudden inspiration”: It seems likely that this manipulation could have been improvised by a highly skilled and inspired musician. Again, as in Chopin’s impromptu, a framework is established within which a structured improvisation can take place. Functional harmony grounds Chopin’s impromptu, but in Kagel symmetries of form and figure manipulation are the controlling features.

The tension between modernist and postmodernist impulses is perhaps more pronounced in À deux mains than in the previous works. The fragments of tonal vocabulary, scales and triads, comprise much of the material of this piece. Again, Kagel’s utilization of these elements is highly suggestive rather than syntactically determinate. There is a pronounced quality of non-specific tonal reference, yet direct invocation of the functional tonal hierarchy never materializes. Thus, Kagel’s postmodernist tendency is to connote music of the past vaguely and hazily, rather than to directly quote older works or even attempt a stylistic appropriation. The dehistoricization of the musical surface lends the work multiple identities, reflecting the multitudinous spirit of postmodernism.

The paradoxical notion of a notated improvisation that integrates such complex polyrhythmic melodies is another facet of the postmodern position: “rewriting” the modern.\textsuperscript{94} Improvisation is of course a method associated with mass-popular forms of musical entertainment (e.g., jazz and rock) as well as indigenous music from around the world. Its application here performs a modernist and a postmodernist function: Kagel’s notational complexity and unified vocabulary exemplify the modernist stance of absolute control, whereas the contemporary evocation of the ideal trait of the nineteenth-century

\textsuperscript{94}See pp. 44-5 for a discussion of “rewriting the modern.”
impromptu (“sudden inspiration”) combined with suggestions of contemporary approaches (e.g., free jazz) lies most decidedly in the postmodern area. The inclusion of improvisational qualities does not hinder the relative complexity of the music, nor does it create an easy solution in terms of categorization. Kagel here does not invoke or reference any kind of specifically known improvisational tradition. Instead, the rewriting of improvisational quality itself through Kagel’s unique musical style of figure manipulation renders a more far-reaching synthesis, or de-categorization. Again, Kagel has not only fulfilled the expectations of the genre, but has expanded upon them in significant ways.

In conclusion, Kagel’s impromptu fulfills many implications of the phrase “for both hands.” The work features a constant drama of both hands playing at once; the contours of this drama undulate according to the distribution of polyrhythm, since the hands play synchronously at one moment and asynchronously the next. In the majority of this piece it is both hands that seem to be improvising together, for the established tradition of melody vs. accompaniment (e.g., in the classic jazz piano “comp-and-solo” hierarchy or in previous impromptus) is virtually nonexistent. This is another dimension of the modernist/postmodernist tension that further fuels the work’s dramatic impact. Additionally, there are actually some small moments of physical theatricality near the end of this piece. After the final climax, a moderato transition section of quiet, sustained melody places the left hand high in the treble register and the right hand in the lower treble register. The hands gradually crawl towards each other and cross just before the coda. The coda then closes the work in niente fashion as the hands play synchronously. There is a long pause just before the last left-hand note, and the composer explicitly
instructs the player to move the left hand at the last possible moment. It is as if the composer wishes to emphasize again, through these final visual gestures, the scope of possibility for music to be played with both hands; the last gesture of the piece humorously demonstrates that perhaps the player has forgotten how to play with one hand, refusing to relinquish the close relationship it has had with the other hand throughout the entirety of the work.
Kagel’s rhapsody is the largest and most mature work he has yet written for solo piano. Its breadth of gesture, emotional depth, unabashed virtuosity, and range of moods qualify it as one of the ultimate solo piano works of the late century. Kagel at this point in his compositional career is in his second period’s full creative peak, having written other substantial large-scale works such as *Die Stücke der Windrose* (1988-94) and *... , den 24.xii.1931* (1988-91) during this time. All of the major traits from *An Tasten* and *À deux mains*, including figural transformation, formal contrast, cadenza-like passages, polyrhythmic complexity, discrete dynamic shapes between the hands, tonal references, and other features are brought to a broader fruition in this work. The work contains the dialectical balance of postmodern and modern attributes outlined in the previous chapters, but here it is much more pronounced due to the rhapsody’s intensity of presentation. Though the scope of this thesis will not allow the appropriately lengthy study this work deserves, my attempt is to close this part of the paper with a cogent set of remarks that best illustrate the essential aspects of the rhapsody in line with the original goals stated at the beginning: How does the oppositional tension or union between postmodern/modern aspects manifest a dramatic effect through transformational processes?
Genre Considerations: Expectations in the Rhapsody

If \(\textit{À deux mains}\) fulfills and exceeds the expectations associated with the impromptu genre, then Kagel’s epic work \textit{Passé Composé} certainly addresses the characteristics of the rhapsody genre. A genre born in the early nineteenth century that resists any rigid format, the rhapsody was and is a perfect vehicle for composers who write instrumental works of free, unbounded forms and extravagant moods. Liszt’s \textit{Hungarian Rhapsodies}, which could be considered the zenith of this genre in the middle of the nineteenth century, are representative of the most common features of this repertory: episodic forms, the use of folk or folk-like themes, intensely differentiated moods, and dramatic impact. Figure 14 contains fragments from Liszt’s \textit{Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6}. Each fragment shows the first few measures of some of the episodes in this work. With each new section, the music changes in tempo and style. Its final Allegro section builds to a great climax that achieves higher and higher extremes of energy and drama, necessitating a Presto tempo change to conclude the work in a joyously frenzied spirit.

Kagel’s rhapsody, though much longer and therefore broader in content, functions on some levels in much the same way as does Liszt’s work. The many episodes of \textit{Passé Composé} feature abrupt and/or smooth changes of tempo, extreme contrasts both dynamically and stylistically, and a dramatic development that culminates in an intensification of energy, tempo and dynamic by the end of the piece. In fact, just as in the impromptu, Kagel employs polyrhythm to define areas of development or forward motion, whereas areas of uniform rhythms define sections of either climax or relative...
stability. The continuum of rhythmic “dissonance” and “consonance” accomplishes the articulation of form in the absence of tonality. Virtuosity is another feature prevalent in Liszt’s and Kagel’s rhapsodies. Unlike his impromptu, Kagel does not limit the technical means in this rhapsody. There is an abundance of difficult repeated notes, various chordal passages, tremolos, trills, arpeggiations, double thirds, etc.
The treatment of musical unity in Kagel’s rhapsody is actually much more consistent than in Liszt’s model works. In Liszt’s rhapsodies, larger sections sometimes do receive variation treatment or are recapitulated, but there are often smaller episodes, especially at the beginnings of these works, that retain relatively little thematic continuity from one section to the next (No. 6 is a clear example of this). In Kagel’s work each episode contains material somehow explicitly or implicitly related to the episodes before it. Similar to Kagel’s approach in the impromptu, recognizable figures help to link episodes even though the musical fabric undergoes continual transformation. The drama of how musical figures are transformed and recontextualized is suggested by the implications of the meaning of the title, *Passé Composé*.

**Reassessing the Past: Implied Meanings of the Title**

Technically speaking, *Passé Composé* refers to the verb tense in French that describes past time or events. Robert Kirzinger noted in his review of a recording of *Passé Composé* that this verb tense conveys “an action for which the consequences have yet to be considered.”95 In Kagel’s rhapsody, interpretations of this can be considered from a few perspectives. First, the music that is heard in the present constantly refers back to music heard earlier in the work, because of the linkage of gestures through transformational procedures. Second, Kagel recomposes and recontextualizes music that has already been heard in the piece. Third, the character of some of Kagel’s musical figures reference, though not by way of any direct quotational devices, “past

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95 Robert Kirzinger, review of *Kagel: Rrrrr...— 4 Orgelstuecke; Episoden, Figuren; Metapiece (Mimetics); À Deux Mains; MM51; Passé Composé*, *Fanfare* 23 (January-February 2000): 270.
composition,” or works and styles of past composers. Fourth, Kagel often mingles seemingly unrelated material at once, separating two distinct characters between the hands. In some cases, the listener is hearing in one hand the same type of music from before, while the music in the other hand recontextualizes the “past” and creates a new juxtaposition in the present. These four points of view overlap and interact with one another in varying levels of sophistication throughout the entire work, making the heteronymous relationship between sections audible to the listener. Active listeners will be able to hear the smooth structure of narrative flow through these transformations across episodes.

The high level of self-reflexivity in *Passé Composé* is one of its key postmodern attributes. The constant and ever-changing allusions to (rather than direct restatement of) previously heard material and the sharp stylistic juxtapositions resonate with the formal aesthetics of many of the postmodern novelists. A few demonstrative examples from the rhapsody should serve to adequately prepare a more meaningful understanding of the rhapsody’s unique variation procedures.

*Analysis: Contrast, Collage, and Episodic Transformation*

The opening three measures, shown in Figure 15, introduce one of this work’s major musical figures in the right hand. It is a rather bland diatonic melody based on stacked thirds that could have been composed by Stravinsky in his ballet phase around the time of *Petrushka*. Triads alternate with notes a third below, forming a broken

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See p. 36 for a brief paragraph on reflexivity in postmodern fiction.
harmony of sevenths. This simple, unassuming musical phrase could be heard as a reference to folk music or to the light compositional processes of early salon music. It is certainly suggestive of some indefinite musical past, for there is no easy way to tell exactly when or where a figure like this could have been written. The distinct quintuplet figure occurring simultaneously in the left hand creates an obvious instance of juxtaposition; not only does the rhythm of the left hand clash with that of the right (i.e., five subdivisions per beat with the four in the right hand) but every other aspect clashes as well. The left hand is written entirely on black notes, in considerable discord with the all white-note diatonicism of the right hand. The left hand is not to be phrased outside of occasional accents, while the right hand is assigned specific dynamic shaping. The left hand must play entirely staccato, but the right hand alternates legato with some staccato punctuation. In all aspects, the left hand is utterly opposed to the music in the right hand.

When played together, the polyrhythmic product is a complex and paradoxical melding of two separate ideas, yet the character of each can be heard distinctly.

These two ideas are developed together through m. 31 in a manner consistent with Kagel’s figure technique of creating lines that are unpredictable yet maintain a consistent

1) l. h.: mit Ausnahme der Akzente bleibt die Lautstärke bis Takt 13 konstant; die dynamische Phrasierung findet in der r. H. statt.
   r. h.: apart from the accents, the volume is constant up to bar 13; the phrasing through dynamics takes place in the r. h.

surface identity. There is a register shift down an octave at m. 18 but the same texture is
explored via the constant micro-variation of Kagel’s musical figures.

Figure 16. Kagel, *Passé Composé*, mm. 32-40

A true change occurs at m. 32, shown in Figure 16 (mm. 32-40). The diatonic
figure is now turned upside down, with the triad on the bottom and single melodic notes
on the top. There is also a simultaneous inversion of hands at m. 32; the left hand plays a
triplet figure above the material in the right hand. The music of the left hand is
transformed in dual modes. First, it is related to the previous left-hand quintuplets
through the choice of all black notes, creating a pentatonic-based harmony. Second, the
rhythm and contour is a distorted mapping of the right-hand diatonic melody onto the
notes of the black-key pentatonic field. The harmonic clash of black-key harmony and
white-key harmony is consequently only slightly varied; any change in the sound is more
from the textural changes that result from the inversion of the hands and an increase in left-hand chordal activity. In other words, though Kagel transforms a number of elements at once, the new material is heard as a slight variation of the previous music. Combining transformations across various parameters yet maintaining a unified context allows Kagel to generate the dramatic narrative that materializes from recreating prior music, whether it is of the immediate or distant past.

The previous discussion concerns mainly vertical events, but Kagel also transforms his material in horizontal directions. As the right-hand melody develops further in Figure 16 (mm. 32-40), Kagel subtly weaves in more single-step melodic notes. These single steps are a conflation of the step-wise motion of the triads (see Figure 15, p. 101) from the beginning of the piece. Here Kagel recomposes previous material by realizing its other potentialities. By m. 39, the melody in the top voice moves entirely by step rather than by third. This gradual change in the melodic contour sets up the next section at m. 41, which reincorporates intervalllic thirds in an especially dramatic way.

Figure 17. Kagel, *Passé Composé*, mm. 41-4

At mm. 41-4 (Figure 17), a stunning passage in pure diatonic harmony ensues. The step-wise melody in the right hand, now grouped in triplet rhythm, continues quasi-repetitively against the septuplet arpeggiation in the left hand. The left hand arpeggiates a pattern of stacked thirds from F₁ up to d in the next octave and back down, resulting in a rather jazzy-sounding F₁₃ harmony. Again, past music is cast into a new context; the now-familiar right-hand melody is accompanied not by contrasting black-note harmony, but instead with its own reinforced white-key diatonicism. As this section progresses, Kagel transforms the left-hand accompanimental figure by transposing it onto other notes and shifting the internal harmony slightly. Figure 18 (mm. 47-8) shows Kagel’s transpositions, which alternate now from mainly white-key notes to mainly black-note patterns once every septuplet group. Each left-hand run is built up from different combinations of major and minor thirds, the symmetrical constructions of which need to be explored elsewhere. The overall effect of this accompaniment is a kind of kaleidoscopic harmonic undulation that nevertheless still bears considerable aural resemblance to the diatonic left hand accompaniment from before.

Figure 18. Kagel, Passé Composé, mm. 47-8

These examples typify the overlapping processes at work in this composition. Figures 19 and 20 present two more examples of how the diatonic musical figure is transformed and recontextualized in later sections of the piece. Figure 19 (mm. 60-8)
shows a more stable rhythmic and pointillistic variation of the diatonic melody; its unity of straight rhythms can be heard as an arrival point in the overall structure.

Figure 19. Kagel, *Passé Composé*, mm. 60-8

A recapitulation of the work’s opening texture strategy occurs in Figure 20 (mm. 97-102). At this point, Kagel transfers the diatonic musical figure to black and white key

Figure 20. Kagel, *Passé Composé*, mm. 97-102
minor triads in the left hand, and the right hand quintuplet figure reappears not in repeated notes but rather in step-wise scales. While this section is audibly related to the opening, it has evolved into an altered texture that reflects some of the musical events that have occurred since the beginning of the work.

Eventually, Kagel’s transformations overwhelm the integrity of this figure and the composition veers off into a tangential trajectory. However, in one of this work’s most beautiful moments, Kagel rearticulates the original figure clearly and dramatically at m. 194, which is shown in Figure 21 (mm. 194-7). The diatonic figure, having been cast against so much opposing material, is finally stated alone. The once-familiar figure is presented transparently at a pianissimo dynamic in the mixolydian mode, accompanied by a pedal G in the bass and gently rolled chords in the upper treble register. The use of half-pedal suggests an aura of distant, faded memory. It is a testimony to Kagel’s creative powers that he continued to find refreshing idioms within which to place this worn, previously eviscerated little melody.

This example (Figure 21) also demonstrates another technique used frequently in this piece, figure isolation. While Figure 21 portrays the diatonic musical figure in isolation, Figure 22 (mm. 277-80) shows the isolation of the repeated note figure. In these
two examples, Kagel has separated in space and time the two figures that were presented together at the opening of the work. These and other sections of figure isolation help balance those sections containing clashing materials.

Figure 22. Kagel, *Passé Composé*, mm. 277-80


It should be abundantly clear that the sheer variety of Kagel’s compositional approaches in the rhapsody reveal a very different set of priorities from those in *À deux mains*. This is Kagel in his most disciplined yet also most freely creative mode, without the contrived constraints found in *An Tasten*. Much of the work proceeds from these initial examples to sections of incredible violence contrasted with those of ultra-delicate tenderness. Though the juxtaposed-material sections relate to the double-coded melody/accompaniment paradox found in *An Tasten*, many sections of Kagel’s rhapsody are written in a clear melody vs. accompaniment hierarchy.

There is also a grand narrative flow to the entire work, which culminates in a rather drawn-out climactic ending that gains momentum to the last measure. Similar to his treatment of “untransforming” the work’s major musical figure at the climax of *À deux mains*, Kagel winnows the musical surface down to the rapid pulsations of arpeggiated triads at the end of the rhapsody. The music in Figure 23 (mm. 404-7) shows the last two systems of music in the piece: an obsessively repetitive broken-chord frenzy in flat-key notation.
It is as though the emotional intensity of the work has forced the musical material into a gravitational funnel, capitulating to its barest essentials (quasi-B-flat minor, one octave ranges for both hands) to the end.

It is an exciting ending as written, but Kagel of course cannot leave sonic theatricality out of this work. After the final page of music, there is an explanation for an alternative ending. Kagel explains that the performer may elect to turn on a small, unsophisticated tape player at the final chord (which would be sustained by the pedal in this case). The tape player would be hidden under or inside the piano and imperceptibly turned on at the moment of the final chord. The tape that plays should have 75-90 seconds of music from an earlier part of the rhapsody, preferably a recording of one of the softer, gentler sections. The instructions indicate that the tape player volume should fade out with the decaying piano sound. The quality of the electronic player should be rather low-budget, so that the slightly distorted and fuzzy sound lends the work’s closing
moments an “atmosphere of ‘indefinite past.’” The ending, when done in this manner, dramatically emphasizes the processes at work in the piece from the beginning—through the longer gap of time between the final section and the contrasting taped material from minutes before. It is the ultimate self-reflexive gesture in the work and firmly edifies the work’s postmodernist standing.

**Dramatic Implications**

In Kagel’s *Passé Composé*, a lucid narrative arises out of the conflicts and reconstitutions of previously heard material. Various musical figures, akin to characters in a literal drama, are developed and portrayed in supportive and oppositional environments. The continual reshaping of these figures unifies the overall structure and lends substance to the inextricable activity of the surface. The relative clarity of the transformational processes affecting the many metamorphosing textures of the surface allows the listener to discern the shape of the dramatic curve from moment to moment. The subtitle of this work is “KlavieRhapsodie,” and indeed the composition features the imaginative, sensational moods and episodic form usually associated with the genre. Thus, the dramatic curve of *Passé Composé* undergoes wild undulations of tension and release, rendering a powerful and stirring listening experience for the audience.

For those who are attuned to the aspects that best represent musical postmodernism, this would seem a representative work for many reasons. Not only is Kagel reinvigorating a romantic-era genre and using the connotative power of the triad in

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this piece; *Passé Composé* also contains overt gestures of self-reflexivity, many moments of the kind of stylistic collage associated with postmodernism, and the vague referencing of past music and aesthetics through the numerous textures employed in the work. But the work displays no mere eclecticism—it is too unified and rarefied. In its more heavily chromatic episodes, it is possible that Kagel used some personalized form of serialism to rationalize the choices of pitch, rhythm, and dynamics. However, whatever system he might have used (and it may be pointless to try and uncover these imbedded secrets) is continually disrupted and remains “impure” at any rate.

Thus Kagel is at his most perplexing in this work when one considers the modern and postmodern debate. The exquisite experience of tension and release in this piece comes in large part from the postmodernist slackening of modernist binary-oppositional traits (e.g., modal/serially chromatic, subjective/objective, chaotic/integrated, hierarchy/equalization, juxtaposed/unified, transparent/definite, etc.) found strewn in fragments throughout the work. Yet for all of its variety the work is extremely unified and specific (excepting the final gesture), revealing its allegiance to modern aesthetic values. It is a romantic, modern, and postmodern work: This incorporation is the achievement of Kagel’s craft. Though it succeeds in typifying its genre, *Passé Composé* also undergoes de-categorization—it induces the sublime feeling through its “strange combinations.”

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98These words recall Lyotard’s position on the sublime effect mentioned in Chapter 2—see pp. 44-5.
The solo piano music of Mauricio Kagel fills a unique space in the repertoire. Its range, from *Metapiece* through *Passé Composé*, is representative of the composer’s overall output. From the beginning of his compositional career, Kagel has shown an ability to intertwine the notions of modernism and postmodernism; this has been explored recently by musicologists such as Paul Attinello and Björn Heile (see the selected bibliography for their articles.) This thesis was influenced by their ideas, but my trajectory was to apply them to Kagel’s piano works. It is important to remember that the oft-quoted differences between modernism and postmodernism are largely overemphasized, which can lead to the false impression that they are diametrically opposed to one another and diachronic in nature. Neither is true; modernist impulses still influence artists today, while much postmodern art engages the essential attributes of modernism.

Kagel’s music exemplifies both of these attitudes and perhaps can teach us that contemporary composers have in many ways found personal solutions to the “postmodern debate.” Kagel’s initial period of composition was *antagonistically* postmodern, containing fractured forms, absurd juxtapositions, graphic notation, irony, and disjunction. It cannot be overemphasized that this earlier work especially relied on high modernist techniques (e.g., the graphical notation of *Metapiece*), which would lead some to categorize his music as absolutely modern. However, Kagel’s musical style
changed gradually in the 1970s towards a more integrational postmodernism—a mode in which modernist aesthetic values could coexist with selected postmodern approaches, yielding a personal, subjective style that could also be fluidly expressive in wide dimensions. Much of this newer music relied on conventional devices and genres (such as the impromptu or etude), but was most certainly not a reversion to pre-modern music.

Kagel’s newer music would not be what it is without the pioneering experimentation of the high modern, for many of his musical gestures rely on the recasting of ultra-modern techniques to suit his own personal style. One central quality of Kagel’s newer music is the composer’s uniquely personal manipulation of “musical figures.” Instead of fracturing the musical rhetoric, Kagel guides the listener along a new kind of narrative via the relationships between musical figures and their transformations through the course of a composition. These transformations are meant to be audibly accessible, so that the listener is able to participate in the musical experience immediately without the need for studied “preparation.”

Figures in Kagel’s newer works tend to be built from triads or conventional scales, leading some to simply label the newer works postmodern. But this neglects Kagel’s modernist treatment of his materials, much of which involves rational control and ultra-specific scoring in all musical elements. Therefore, for both periods it is best to think of Kagel’s work as both modern and postmodern, with differences in attitude and gesture. The newer works can even be thought of as stretching back to romantic values, especially those that utilize the genre titles from that period of Western music.

The three works explored in this thesis after Metapiece all possess provocative titles and romantic-era subtitles. They are dramatic pieces that expand upon the
possibilities for each genre’s expressive potential but also explore a dialectical synthesis of modern and postmodern traits. Part of Kagel’s musical drama (his earlier overt theatricality has been channeled into sonic drama through more exclusive musical means) arises from this tension of postmodern and modern manifestations of objective and subjective elements.

In Kagel’s view, there is no way to eliminate the subject from creative work, even when the individual is at pains to objectively manipulate his/her materials. In a letter of personal correspondence, Kagel answered a question of mine concerning the concept of unity in his music:

Unity in music composition is not measurable. I try of course to find rational reasons in the transformation of my musical figures, but the most interesting aspect is for me the irrationality of rationalism. The so-called objectivity in music seems to me to have always a subjective ground.  

Kagel’s pithy statements best summarize this exploration of his piano music. These four works exhibit a wide spectrum of musical discourse in which unity, transformation, subjectivity, objectivity, rationality, and irrationality are the humanist traits found transcribed into musical gesture. Despite the composer’s reluctance to admit to the possibility of defining exactly how these binary traits are manifested in musical composition, the attempt to search for deeper understanding through critical assessment continues to lead to new discoveries about the unresolved mysteries of musical experience. In an era of postmodernity such as this one, where modern strains of thought interact with postmodern ones, what remains unresolved may yet be transported into strange and beautiful music by composers like Mauricio Kagel.

99Mauricio Kagel, Cologne, faxed to Joshua Nemith, Cincinnati, 23 May 2003, personal library of Joshua Nemith.


*Scores*


*Recordings*
