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## Chapter 16

### Towards a Theory of Experimental Music Theatre: 'Showing-Doing', 'Non-Matrixed Performance' and 'Metaxis'<sup>1</sup>

Björn Heile

#### *I. What is Experimental Music Theatre?*

Definitions can be difficult and are not always helpful. Reality has a habit of consisting of shades of grey which evade the black and white categorizations erected by taxonomical systems. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this chapter some terminological clarifications are essential. In this text, experimental music theatre refers to a type of performance in which theatrical actions are created by music-making (playing of musical instruments or other sounding objects, singing). This form needs to be distinguished from other types of music theatre, such as opera and related genres, in which music *accompanies* theatrical action.

There are two primary features which distinguish operatic forms, including modernist and avant-gardist ones, from the type of experimental music theatre explored here: firstly, a constitutive separation between stage and orchestra pit, which has been described as a metaphysical divide (Abbate 1996, 14-19), and secondly, the union of singing and acting, whereby dramatic roles are enunciated through the singing voice. In experimental music theatre as defined here, by contrast, the physical and gestural elements inherent in the music-making *are* the action, and there is no (actual or virtual) separation between stage and instrumental ensemble; nor are there dramatic roles. The importance of this distinction derives partly from the fact that there are operatic forms of music theatre which have been described as

experimental and that the term experimental music theatre is often and legitimately used more widely than it is here (Bithell; Kager 2002). Kager (2002) and Danuser (Dahlhaus and Danuser 1992, 347) have suggested the term ‘scenic composition’ (*szenische Komposition*) for the phenomenon discussed here, but this has not stuck, at least not outside German-speaking areas; a recent collection (Rebstock and Roesner 2012) has introduced ‘composed theatre’.<sup>2</sup> Although some composers and practitioners have coined terms for their own practices, some of which will be mentioned in this article, these are usually too closely associated with their own work to be more widely applicable. In light of this terminological confusion, it seems best to use a fairly conventional term but define it clearly.

As defined here, then, experimental music theatre normally eschews or subverts scenic illusion, dramatic representation, role-play and fictional time. The performers are mostly who they are and their actions do not refer to a fictional plot there and then (outside of the time and place of the performance itself) but are solely experienced here and now. For these reasons, experimental music theatre is more akin to avant-gardist traditions such as happenings, performance and live art than to traditional, operatic models of music theatre. However, although it will on occasion be difficult for audience members to distinguish between happening and performance art on one hand and experimental music theatre on the other, there are significant differences in the practices leading up to and grounding a performance. In the case of experimental music theatre, composers tend by training to be most comfortable with notation, so the work is in these cases defined by its reproducibility, and the performance refers to an a-temporal category outside itself: ‘the work’. By contrast, happenings and performance art are defined by their ephemeral, one-off quality;

repeat performances are rare and are normally regarded as a new piece, whereas audiovisual documentation is often regarded as an adequate representation (cf. Auslander 2009). In other words, the performance *is* the work. In this chapter, I will focus on forms of experimental music theatre that are essentially based on scores produced by composers. This is not to suggest that forms of devised or improvised theatre cannot qualify as experimental music theatre according to the above criteria or that they (or any other forms of music theatre for that matter) are less interesting or valuable; rather, I intend to establish a clearly delineated field in order to describe it with maximum clarity.

There is a particular affinity between experimental music theatre and what in the wake of Hans-Thies Lehmann's influential account has become known as 'postdramatic theatre' (Lehmann 2006). Indeed, some of Lehmann's characterizations can be directly applied to experimental music theatre, for instance when he describes postdramatic theatre's performance text as becoming 'more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than signification, more energetic impulse than information' or when he lists its characteristic stylistic traits as: 'parataxis, simultaneity, play with the density of signs, musicalization, visual dramaturgy, physicality, irruption of the real, situation/event' (Lehmann 2006, 84–85). It would therefore be tempting to define experimental music theatre as postdramatic music theatre according to Lehmann's account. However, the focus on musical performance in experimental music theatre has significant dramaturgical consequences which differ substantially from the importance of such aspects as text, speech, and dialogue in postdramatic theatre, despite the latter's emancipation from the logocentricity of drama. Similarly, it is no

accident that Lehmann feels the need to distinguish postdramatic theatre from more traditional forms of drama, whereas the opposite pole for experimental music theatre is arguably represented by opera and related genres, which have their own specific history and generic conventions.

Many of Lehmann's aforementioned traits will become clearer later on, but it is worth dwelling a little on the first two, namely parataxis and simultaneity. By parataxis, Lehmann means a non-hierarchical relation between theatrical signs. Whereas in traditional western drama, all theatrical means aim at scenic illusion and the representation of a fictional reality and are thus subordinated to the spoken text – a hierarchical relation going back to Aristotle (Aristotle 1997) – in postdramatic theatre theatrical signs, whether they are visual or acoustic, whether consisting of spoken dialogue, kinetic motion with objects, lighting or video projection, can be independent of one another and of varying or equal importance, depending not only on the performance but also on the preferences and 'perceptive strategies' adopted by audience members (Lehmann 2006, 86–87). This last point is clarified further in Lehmann's remarks on simultaneity (2006, 87-88), where he points out that postdramatic theatre does not necessarily aim for a totalizing experience, but may deliberately overwhelm an audience's perceptual capacity, thus forcing them to prioritize certain aspects over others, in the process creating an individually differentiated experience. Similarly, experimental music theatre is characterized by an often disjunctive combination of media, whereby different elements, such as sound, motion and light, do not organically reinforce one another or create a harmonious whole but may be independent of one another or be at cross-purposes. This emphasis can be related to Nicholas Cook's theory of multimedia, in which he

argues that common approaches, notably in film studies, too often associate structural unity with aesthetic value, which leads him to place an equal emphasis on what he calls 'difference' (between media) as on their 'similarity', further differentiating between 'conformance' (which is based on similarity), and 'complementation' as well as 'contest' (based on difference) (Cook 1998, 99). Lehmann and Cook's emphasis on parataxis and difference respectively is worth stressing since it is often, in my view wrongly, assumed that modernist and avant-gardist conceptions of music theatre and of multimedia in general have at their roots the synaesthetic union of the arts envisaged in Wagner's idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and its legacy. In contradistinction to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal of a mutually reinforcing organic totality in the service of an illusionist aesthetic, experimental music theatre stresses the mutual independence and non-hierarchical simultaneity of different media. Few things could be further from the spirit of experimental music theatre than Wagner's hidden orchestra.

Finally, since, as has already been suggested, experimental music theatre is derived from the performance situation and the physical actions required for the performance of music, it is ontologically closer to the concert situation than to any stage genre and it is consequently more 'at home' in the concert hall than on the proscenium stage, although more unconventional and theatre-in-the-round settings may likewise be congenial to it.

## *II. John Cage: 'Disciplined Action'*

Experimental music theatre in the sense discussed here draws on a great variety of traditions both from music and theatre, and it shares similarities with a number of

performance practices from western avant-garde and non-western traditions. Without wanting to diminish the significance of those precursors and influences, it makes sense to regard John Cage as the originator of the kind of practices described in this chapter.

In Cage's *Water Music* (1952), the performer, in addition to playing the piano, has to operate a radio, play whistles, pour water from one container into another and deal out a deck of cards.<sup>3</sup> The principle uniting these diverse activities is quite simple: ontologically speaking, there is no categorical difference between what are traditionally considered musical or theatrical, or, for that matter, everyday actions, in this case between playing a couple of notes on a piano, pouring a jug of water or shuffling a deck of cards. All these actions consist of physical movements which have acoustic results (although the latter may be soft as in the case of the cards or technically mediated, as in the case of the radios, where the turning of switches and dials is not normally audible as such but changes the nature of the sound produced by the radio). For a composer such as Cage, who had already largely undermined the separation between noise and music in favor of a neutral category of 'sound' and who was about to similarly subvert that between sound and silence (in his famous 'silent piece' 4'33" of the same year), the continuity between the performer's actions would have been quite evident.

It just so happens that we are normally conditioned to disregard any physical activity exercised in favor of the resulting sounds in the case of the performance of music, whereas we tend to focus on body movements in the case of theatrical actions (e.g. we say that 'an actor crosses the stage' rather than that she 'creates a regular beat with her feet while walking across the stage'). Concerts of classical (and to a

lesser extent, jazz and popular) music are governed by strict boundaries between what constitutes the aesthetic event and what doesn't. The performance space, the filing in of the musicians, their dress and their gestures do not form part of what is usually regarded as 'the performance' – although they are critical in 'framing' it; likewise, the performers' warming up and tuning before the performance (which can be extremely interesting) should as far as possible be blocked out, just like any extraneous noises during the performance such as coughing or passing traffic. None of this of course prevents audience members to turn their attention to other aspects of the spectacle than those privileged by concert conventions, and it is indeed an intention of many forms of experimental music theatre to overcome the abovementioned boundaries and encourage a more holistic perception.

It is worth comparing this type of framing of the performance with its counterpart in traditional drama. Consider a play in which a character plays a piano piece. Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* begins with the main protagonist, Algernon Moncrieff, playing the piano off-stage. What he is playing is not specified, but one could imagine it to be a Chopin Nocturne. What is the difference to a performance of the same Nocturne in a piano recital by, say, Maurizio Pollini? In the first case, we hear the piece 'semantically', that is we perceive it as part of the action of the play. We assume that there is a reason for the music to be played, having to do with the plot, and that the manner of the performance is not an end in itself but a means of revealing aspects of the character (which turns out to be the case). Everything else – what music has been played, whether we recognize it and how it has been performed – is secondary. We are not necessarily invited to enjoy the music; its presence is purely functional. In the case of Pollini playing, exactly the



reverse is the case: all incidental aspects are secondary and the music has to be enjoyed purely on its own, and there are no ulterior reasons for it being performed. That Pollini plays a Chopin Nocturne is of more than incidental importance, and nobody would suggest that his performance is meant to reveal his character; on the contrary, the quality of his playing is the reason for our attending the recital, and we are to judge it critically in the way we wouldn't Algernon's playing. As a counterpart to 'semantic listening', this might be termed 'aesthetic listening'.

By combining a number of actions that are normally associated with the performance of music (e.g. playing the piano) with others we would normally expect to find in a theatrical play or everyday situation (e.g. pouring a jug of water) and some that seem to suit both frames (e.g. playing whistles) in a non-mimetic context, Cage evades all the categorical distinctions I have outlined: between physical action and sounding result, between theatrical and musical performance, between aesthetic and semantic listening, and between visual and acoustic domains. The usually overlooked (or under-appreciated) physical action involved in playing the piano is emphasized as are the customarily unheard noises produced by pouring a jug of water. Indeed, Cage has pointed out that he likewise wishes to erase the boundary between the inside and outside of the performance event, stressing how everyday situations can be experienced like theatre and how extraneous 'noise' can be accepted alongside musical performance and, presumably, unplanned events alongside theatrical performance (Cage, Kirby, and Schechner 1965).

What enables Cage's combination of and continuation between music-making and physical action is his imaginative use of musical notation (see Figure 22.1).

Conventional staff notation prioritizes the sounding result over the means to produce

it, thus discouraging the conception of music as a physical activity. Nevertheless, a series of musical notes can be interpreted as instructions to perform specific physical actions, often involving an object, such as a musical instrument. As such, it is not different in principle from any other instruction to carry out specific actions, such as pouring a jug of water. Where music differs slightly is that the notational precision with which the succession, speed and quality (e.g. loud – soft) is specified is higher than is available for most other actions (with the possible exception of dance notations such as Laban). Cage had earlier developed a type of what was later called ‘time-span’ notation, whereby, instead of notating exact rhythmic values, he specified the relative duration of events or actions within a precisely delineated time grid. This enabled him to treat traditionally musical and theatrical actions in similar ways and performers to execute them with similar precision. In the case of *Water Music*, Cage has also specified that the, rather oversized, score should be visible for the audience. It is no surprise that composers following Cage sought to further minimize the distinction between what are traditionally regarded as musical and as theatrical actions by using language to ‘notate’ music (as instructions for performance) and/or musical notation for non-musical (and often silent) actions or events (cf. Kotz 2010, 13–58).

**[INSERT FIGURE 22.1 HERE]**

Not least due to the precision of the notation, the succession of events in *Water Music* is meticulously planned and results in a tight dramaturgy, in which at times frantic activity at the limit of what is physically possible is contrasted with periods of

calm or stasis, emphatic or even violent actions with tender gestures etc. (see Figure 22.2). While there is no plot that ‘legitimizes’ or ‘rationalizes’ the actions, they are linked by the common reference to water, as one of the four elements. This is obvious in the case of the water jugs and to an extent the duck whistles; the sound of the radio will often include a lot of static which can be likened to ocean waves (Cage has specified the frequencies); the piano part consists partly of arpeggios, a common musical depiction of water – only the deck of cards cannot be readily associated with water.

**[INSERT FIGURE 22.2 HERE]**

It is this choreographically precise placing, planning and specification of actions – and, one should add, their meticulous performance by Cage himself and his ‘trusted interpreters’, that earns them the title of ‘disciplined action’. This term appears in the instruction for Cage’s *0’00*”: ‘In a situation provided with maximum amplification (no feedback), perform a disciplined action.’ (Fetterman 1996) In this instance the disciplined quality does not come about through the precise instructions and timing of the action, but that may be precisely why it has to be expressly stated as the aim, whereas any competent and responsible performer of *Water Music* has to perform disciplined actions by default.

But there is another reason for the significance of the concept of ‘disciplined action’. What seems at issue here is the framing of the event as performance which distinguishes a disciplined action from an everyday action and allows us to perceive the former as aesthetic or otherwise significant (cf. Lehmann’s emphasis on the

‘irruption of the real’ and the ‘production of presence’: (Lehmann 2006, 99–104; 141–143)). Such an intent could be seen to contradict Cage’s stated intention of overcoming the separation between life and art. However, it should be recognized that this tends to take the form of an aestheticization of the everyday, or as he has put it: ‘If there is this lack of distinction between art and life, then one could say: Well, why have the arts when we already have it in life? A suitable answer from my point of view is that we thereby celebrate.’ (Cage, Kirby, and Schechner 1965, 58) In other words, having seen what appear to be everyday actions performed in a disciplined way as part of an artistic performance is meant to open one’s eyes to the potential beauty of the everyday, which is obscured through the dulling effect of habit.

Cage further developed the principles established in *Water Music* in a series of closely related pieces, such as *Water Walk*, *Music Walk* and *Sounds of Venice* (cf Fetterman 1996). Starting with *Music Walk*, he increasingly incorporated elements of indeterminacy, which is to say that performers are given substantial freedom over the actions to be executed (*0’00”* is a radical example of the principle; Fetterman 1996, 47-96). This is of particular relevance in the case of several performers. The result is a simultaneity of independent and uncoordinated strands, typically of a complexity that is difficult if not impossible to achieve through central planning. This kind of complexity, in which any experience of synchronicity or organic integrity is purely fortuitous, may overwhelm audience’s perceptual abilities forcing them to focus on specific details (note the importance given to simultaneity by Lehmann above). The impetus for such explorations of indeterminate simultaneity was arguably provided by the famous happening at Black Mountain College (1952), in which Cage was centrally involved. Following that, he developed the principle further in such works

as *Theatre Piece* (1960) for up to eight performers and *Song Books* (1970) (Fetterman 1996, 97–124).

### *III. Mauricio Kagel: 'Instrumental Theatre'*

It is rare that musical or artistic developments can be precisely dated and located. When it comes to the influence exerted by Cage on European concepts of music theatre, such precision is possible. On 14 October 1958 (not 1959 as is sometimes reported), Cage, together with Cornelius Cardew and David Tudor, premiered his *Music Walk* at the Galerie 22 in Düsseldorf (Schieffer et al. 1998, 89). Among the audience were a young composer who had only arrived from Argentina the year before, Mauricio Kagel, and the influential critic Heinz-Klaus Metzger, who responds to the event with a talk on what he calls '*instrumentales Theater*' (instrumental theatre), by which he means a theatre that results from instrumental performance (Schieffer et al. 1998, 89; Zuber 1999, 206, fn. 60). All of Kagel's major theatrical works follow this seminal event, and he significantly applied Metzger's term 'instrumental theatre' to his innovations (Kagel 1997; Kagel 1963). Kagel's works and ideas directly or indirectly influenced most European composers of music theatre, notably Dieter Schnebel, György Ligeti, Vinko Globokar or Georges Aperghis, so the line of transmission can be traced with unusual accuracy. Kagel's experience of Cage's theatrical work is not limited to this one occasion, however, and his presence is also documented at the celebrated Contre Festival organized by Mary Bauermeister in her gallery in Cologne in June 1960, during which he saw Cage's *Water Music*, among others, and took part in a performance of La Monte Young's *Poem for Chairs etc. (or other sound sources)* (Köln 1993, 25).

Kagel's experimental music theatre work follows Cage's in overcoming the distinctions between musical and theatrical actions. Likewise, his practice, like Cage's, can be viewed as a corrective to the increasing disembodiment of music in modernity and therefore as a type of performance practice of all music, rather than a genuinely new artistic genre (Adlington 2005). He has, however, shown less interest in chance or indeterminacy, at least as far as non-intentionality is concerned. On the contrary, his work often takes on expressive qualities. In conjunction with this retention of the more traditional role of artist as creator or *auteur*, he has only occasionally and hesitantly questioned the separation of life and art. In addition, his work is rarely as heterogeneous as Cage's; most of his works are instead derived from single music-theatrical ideas. Indeed, he may well be the most systematic among artists investigating the intersection between musical and theatrical performance. All these traits are also reflected in his use of notation, which is more commonly based on traditional staff notation than in the case of Cage, although Kagel does extend this freely. His frequent and systematic use of musical notation for non-musical actions, most systematically explored in his 'scenic composition' *Staatstheater* (1970) is particularly revealing of his approach to multimedia (Heile 2006b, 57–60).

Rebstock (2007, 226) has usefully arranged Kagel's earlier theatrical works on a matrix with two axes, one describing a continuum between theatrical and musical materials, the other between what he calls 'instrumental' and 'multi-strand' (*Mehrspur*) conceptions. The former spectrum delineates the distinction between the theatrical effect arising from the gestural qualities of musical performance on the one side and the presentation of music within a theatrical context on the other; the latter,

which can be likened to Cook's distinction between 'similarity' and 'difference' above, refers to the differentiation between a relatively homogeneous derivation of theatrical effects from instrumental playing and those built on heterogeneous multi-medial interactions, not unlike the principle of simultaneity in Cage (which is also an element in Kagel, albeit usually not on the same scale as in Cage).

These differentiations can be illustrated with Kagel's earliest music-theatrical works, composed directly after his encounter with Cage's *Water Music. Sonant (1960/...)* for Guitar, Harp, Double Bass and Drums and *Sur scène* for Mute Actor, Speaker, Baritone and Three Instrumentalists, which were composed practically simultaneously in 1960, define some of the fundamental principles of Kagel's instrumental theatre. While the former is based on musical materials and generates theatre from the gestural qualities of music-making and the overstepping of the presentational frame of music performance, the latter presents the performance of music within a theatrical frame (in suggesting that *Sur scène* is based on theatrical materials I differ somewhat from Rebstock). Similarly, where *Sonant* is based on a single connection between acoustic and visual elements, *Sur scène* presents a multi-strand combination of heterogeneous visual and acoustic elements (such a correlation between the nature of the material and the degree of complexity is by no means the norm, however).

*Sonant* would pass for a conventional concert piece if it weren't for a number of elements that draw attention to the physical qualities of music-making, thus making it difficult to concentrate solely on their sonic results as the presentational frame of musical performance demands. Throughout the piece, there is a disjunction between physical gesture and musical outcome. The entire piece is to be played 'as softly as

possible' as the score specifies. However, many passages are extremely virtuosic, requiring large leaps and frantic action. The sketches show that Kagel composed music not only on the basis of its acoustic characteristics but also the performance gestures required (Heile 2006b, 35–37). Audiences are thus presented with the spectacle of a group of musicians struggling visibly hard and making fast and wide movements but producing very little sound. Indeed, one performance option has the performers silently mime an entire section (which is precisely notated). Yet another movement consists only of verbal instructions for the players, many of which are to be spoken aloud during performance.

*Sur scène* goes in many ways in the opposite direction from *Sonant*, presenting a satirical portrait of the new music scene (then, but in many ways also now). Together the performers recreate the roles of the main players in musical life: the actor pretends to be a member of the audience; the speaker, who reads an absurd musicological treatise, a critic; and the musicians play themselves, the instrumentalists wandering around the stage, nonchalantly playing a couple of notes on the piano here, or the percussion there, and the baritone holding forth in parodically operatic manner, oblivious to what is going on around him and with no apparent connection to the other music. Whether the critic is commenting on the music in 'real time', or the musicians provide the music examples to the critic's talk (which was Kagel's intention as the sketches indicate) is never clear, but in either case communication seems faulty, heightening the grotesquery of the situation (Heile 2006b, 39).

Here then the primary frame is that of a theatrical performance, and this of course has an effect on how the music is perceived. As audience members we cannot be



quite certain whether we should listen to the music and enjoy it aesthetically or whether we should integrate it semantically into the theatrical performance. To return to my earlier example, whether the musicians are more like Maurizio Pollini or more like Algernon Moncrieff is difficult to decide; it depends in equal measure on how the piece is performed and on how we interpret it. Likewise, the performers' various musical and theatrical activities result in a chaotic, heterogeneous interplay (multi-strand), rather than the relatively simple linkage between action and sound of *Sonant*.

Another type of clash between musical and theatrical frames is presented by Kagel's later *Match* for three players (1964).<sup>4</sup> In many ways the music-theatrical conception is akin to that in *Sonant*: all the performers are instrumentalists and the frame of musical performance remains intact (just about) throughout. What happens in the piece stretches these conventions to the limit, however. In the piece, two cellists compete under the direction of a percussionist-umpire in a musical game of tennis or table tennis. The theatrical effect is supported visually by the seating arrangements of the musicians: the two cellists are seated on either side at the edge of the stage, as they would in an actual match, while the percussionist is situated in the center towards the back of the podium. Nevertheless, the crucial hint at a ball game is of an acoustic nature: the piece begins with a rhythmic exchange of Bartók pizzicati strongly reminiscent of bouncing balls. When one of the players 'drops the ball' – an audibly fluffed note a quarter-tone higher, weaker and strongly denaturalized – the percussionist comes in with a single sharp attack on the marimba, the equivalent of giving the point. After this opening exchange, Kagel drops the acoustic mimesis, but the basic structure of the two cellists competing under the often incompetent supervision of the percussionist-umpire remains.

Here a tension arises between the ostensible level of musical performance and a potential level of mimetic representation, that of a ball game. The latter, however, remains largely virtual: the performers do not step out of their role as instrumentalists to impersonate sportspersons, but their actions make sense on both the level of musical performance and that of (table) tennis. (According to reviews, the original performers, Siegfried Palm, Klaus Storck und Christoph Caskel, sometimes performed the piece in sports dress.) Kagel himself claims to have received the piece in a dream, and it does indeed have a dream-like quality – not least presumably by suggesting a homology between musical performance and ball games which may be surprising at first but curiously persuasive.

#### *IV. Framing and Mode of Performance*

The preceding examples from what one might call the ‘classic’ phase of experimental music theatre have highlighted the importance of the mode of performance and of the framing of the event – as performance, rather than everyday event (art and not life); as musical or theatrical event. To start with the former: we have seen that the performers are not play-acting but are executing actions according to instructions, typically quite neutrally. The borderline case is Kagel’s *Match*, in which the performers do seem to be acting as athletes. However, this is arguably more despite the performers’ roles, not because of them. The piece depends for its effect on the performers carrying out their musical actions as precisely as possible; it is the nature of these actions that, almost against the performers’ intentions, should take on the quality of a ball game, not their attempt at acting out such a role.

### *Showing Doing*

To distinguish solely between acting and not-acting appears too blunt, however.

There are almost innumerable gradations between the poles of Stanislavskian role-play and un-self-conscious everyday behavior in both staged and everyday situations: priests or shamans performing rituals; teachers or policepersons 'putting on an act' to gain authority; a stand-up comedian or popular singer's persona; a fairy-tale narrator, poem or lied recitalist taking on the roles of the subjects in the texts they perform, etc.

According to the performance theorist Richard Schechner's (Schechner 2006, 22) categorization, there are four types of performance: 'being', 'doing', 'showing doing' and 'explaining showing doing'. In this scheme, the type of performance mostly required by experimental music theatre corresponds to 'showing doing': 'pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing'. On one level, the performers are executing actions – that is the 'doing' element – but on another they seem to be drawing attention to their actions, hence *showing* doing. It is this heightened experience that explains Cage's formulation of 'disciplined action' and that distinguishes the actions performed in *0'00''* (showing doing) from the same actions executed in an everyday situation (doing). More precisely, though, it is often the framing of the spectacle that draws attention to the actions and their discrepancy from the ostensible context: in Kagel's *Sonant*, the performers simply execute (do) actions, but the surplus of the action with regards to conventional concert performance draws attention to them (showing doing); in other words it is the showing that adds a theatrical dimension to what is otherwise musical performance.

### *Non-Matrixed Performance and Non-Matrixed Representation*

It is worth pointing out, however, that Schechner's showing doing underlies most performance: while it illuminates aspects of the performance quality of experimental music theatre, it doesn't differentiate it from other genres. Here, the taxonomy established by Michael Kirby to differentiate different classes on the continuum between not-acting and acting is particularly useful. Kirby (1972) distinguishes between non-matrixed performance, non-matrixed representation, received acting, simple acting and complex acting. The 'acting' side of his taxonomy, where he distinguishes between 'received acting' (e.g. extras in stage, film and television), 'simple acting' (elements of imitation and make-believe) and 'complex acting' (naturalistic role-play), are of relatively little interest here. His definitions of the terms on the 'not-acting' pole, however, illuminates the way experimental music theatre works. In 'non-matrixed performance', the character 'is merely himself and is not imbedded, as it were, in matrices of pretended or represented character, situation, place and time' (4); as examples Kirby gives the stage-attendants in Japanese kabuki theatre, but also, somewhat confusingly, 'many, but by no means all, dance pieces' (3). An even more illuminating term is what Kirby calls 'non-matrixed representation'. Here, Kirby distinguishes between what performers themselves do and what attributes are applied to them (4-5). In non-matrixed representation performers, like in non-matrixed performance, do not act; however, certain representational elements, such as costumes or the stage décor impose a representational framework on them (e.g. a man wearing a Stetson in a saloon is likely to be viewed as a cowboy, whether they intentionally impersonate one or not).

That experimental music theatre is based on non-matrixed performance, as Fetterman (1996, 209) points out with regard to Cage's performances of his own work seems relatively obvious. As Zuber (1999, 206, fn. 60) observes, however, the performers in many of Kagel's work are more than 'merely themselves', and, although she does not spell this out, this 'more' is akin to Kirby's non-matrixed representation. Note, for example, how the speaker in *Sur scène* appears like a critic or professor, the mute actor as an audience member and the musicians not merely as any musicians going about their business unobtrusively, but as *specific* musicians with personal qualities (like actors impersonating musicians). A more obvious example is presented by *Match*, in which the performers appear like tennis players and umpire, without their enacting such roles; here Kirby's formulation of 'representational elements [being] applied *to* the performer[s]' (5, emphasis in original) seems particularly apt. While it is worth considering whether there are similar representational elements in Cage, too (as I believe), it is probably true that Kagel was more interested in them, just as he was correspondingly less interested in indeterminacy. As was already observed, this concern with meaning and expression, in whatever rudimentary or cryptic form, runs through Kagel's work and is most perceptible in his obsession with power relations and violence, which is a common feature of his works (Heile 2006a, 191–192).

### *Metaxis*

I have already drawn attention to the importance of framing in the way performers' actions are interpreted. What characterizes experimental music theatre is a curious combination of and tension between musical performance and theatrical

performance, aesthetic perception (Maurizio Pollini) and semantic perception (Algernon Moncrieff), presentation and representation. Indeed, it can be said that the performers embody and enact this tension.

Using a term adopted by the Brazilian theatre-practitioner Augusto Boal, I call this tension 'metaxis'. The word itself is from the Ancient Greek and used by Plato among others; it denotes a state of in-between-ness and a continual process of mediation between two states (Linds 2006, 114). Boal (1995, 43) defines the term as 'the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image'. What he is referring to is that performers in his 'Theatre of the Oppressed', who enact scenes from their own daily lives, experience the performance simultaneously as reality and as representation. Despite this origin in a pedagogic and political form of theatre, it seems to me that the tension between representation and reality captured by metaxis is an essential aspect of theatre generally (that it has a longer history emboldens me to adapt it from Boal's more specific usage). Metaxis marks the 'willing' in Coleridge's famous phrase 'willing suspension of disbelief'. While we may be immersed in a spectacle and regard it *like* real life, we are never entirely taken in by the illusion but remain aware of the real-life situation of the performance (presentation rather than representation).

In experimental music theatre, metaxis, then, denotes the in-between-ness or simultaneity of, or oscillation between the frames of theatrical and musical performance. All pieces discussed earlier could be used as examples. But the most compelling in this instance is arguably *Match*. It is the dream-like nature of metaxis, albeit a special form of in-between-ness, that allows us to see the performers both as

musicians performing a piece of music and as sportspeople engaged in a game of tennis or table-tennis.

#### *V. Recent Examples*

The tradition of experimental music theatre outlined here has been carried forward by such composers as Heiner Goebbels, Gerhard Stäbler and Michael Finnissy, in addition to Kagel's students, among them Manos Tsangaris, Carola Bauckholt, Maria de Alvear and Giorgio Battistelli. In the course of these later developments, there have of course been significant changes as well as accommodations or combinations with operatic forms of music theatre (as in some of Kagel's later music-theatrical work or in Cage's *Europera* series) as well as with newer forms, such as installations or concert installations. The role of technology has also been significant, but cannot be adequately covered in this chapter. All these directions are relatively comprehensively documented elsewhere (see for example Salzman and Desi 2008). Instead, I want to focus on a number of recent works which adhere quite strictly to the definition of experimental music theatre established here and which have so far escaped widespread attention.

#### *Christopher Fox*

*something to do with belief* (2010) by the British composer Christopher Fox is perhaps the purest and most austere of the examples discussed here, in that its theatrical dimension is entirely and directly derived from instrumental playing. As the introduction to the score states, the piece

involves five musicians playing cello, clarinet, electric guitar, percussion and piano for 24 minutes. Each musician has six actions to perform, each of which can be a single event or a series of events, and each of which involves some preparation. Each set of ACTIONS and PREPARATIONS occurs at two different points during the course of a performance.

Here is a randomly chosen example from the part for the electric guitarist:

*Bound over*

PREPARATION: laying the instrument flat on your knees, put bubble wrap around the fingerboard, securing it loosely with parcel tape.

ACTION: with the two hands arched, the tips of their fingers as close together as possible, tap on the strings as if touch-typing at speed.

PREPARATION: add more parcel tape to the wrapping, making it a little tighter. bubble wrap around the fingerboard, securing it loosely with parcel tape.

ACTION: carry on touch-typing.

And so on.

As explained, each instrumentalist has got six such actions. These are coordinated on a temporal grid (reproduced on Figure 22.3), which arranges actions, each lasting between five seconds and one minute, in five-second intervals. The grid does not associate parts with instruments or specify the actions to be executed; the latter are only identified with letters. The performers therefore have to select their part and associate letters with actions, taking care that the chosen actions can be performed in



the time and sequence allotted to them. They are also asked to make full use of the performance space, with, as the score demands, ‘the musicians as far apart as possible’.

**[INSERT FIGURE 22.3 HERE]**

It is easy to see how the piece responds to the traditions and conventions established by the likes of Cage and Kagel. The instructions for actions, which take the shape of some of those employed by Kagel in *Sonant*, do not distinguish between those traditionally associated with theatrical performance or musical performance. On one hand, a distinction is made between preparation – ‘non-musical’ and not traditionally part of the performance at all; i.e. ‘doing’ according to Schechner, and action – framed as performance and as music; i.e. ‘showing doing’. On the other hand, however, this distinction is not necessarily apparent to audiences, since they both occur in the space and time of the performance. The program text points out that the ‘music blurs the relationship between sounds produced with intention and those produced incidentally’ (the former being presumably part of actions, the latter caused by preparations), but the same blurring concerns the framing of the performance.

Like Cage’s *Water Music* and Kagel’s *Sonant*, the piece operates within the conventions of concert performance, but the complicated preparations and the often minimal sounding result undermine exclusively aesthetic perception, a process aided by the slightly unconventional seating arrangements. Audiences are bound to ask ‘what is going on?’ and direct their *visual* attention to the preparations just as much as they attend *acoustically* to the music produced. While there is, therefore, a

theatrical dimension and metaxis, the piece does not suggest a representational aspect – which does not preclude performers or audience members constructing one – so, rather like much of Cage’s work, the piece is based on non-matrixed performance, rather than non-matrixed representation. This connection to Cagean experimentalism is further highlighted by the use of the temporal grid and elements of indeterminacy (e.g. allowing performers to choose their part and associate actions to the letters indicated in the score). As a result of this, the piece also approaches the principle of simultaneity, in that the simultaneous combination of different preparations and actions is unpredictable, although the types of activities are much less disparate than the cross-medial simultaneities of much of Cage’s work.

### *David Bithell*

Like Fox, the American composer David Bithell experiments with new media in his work. This has led him to a broad range of different types of pieces and media, ranging from work with installation-type interfaces through sonic sculptures and audio-visual environments to various forms of music and dance theatre, often involving complex technological set-ups. By its nature, much of this work goes beyond the scope of this chapter. *Whistle from Above* for Two Percussionists, Robotic Instruments, Staging, Lighting and Computer Sound (2007) can best be described as a multimedia spectacle, with creative use of light projection and what the score aptly calls ‘the voice of God (VOG)’. It does, however, make imaginative use of the metaxis effect of merging musical and theatrical performance.<sup>5</sup>

The piece consists of five ‘whistle stops’, at each of which the two performers play a duet in which they interact with one another and with their environment, while

the Voice of God appears to control the proceedings and at the same time commenting on it in the manner of a chorus (this is perhaps the most obvious reference to Beckett's *Acts without Words*, from which the title of the work, which acts as a stage direction in the Beckett, is taken).

The most relevant sections for our purposes are Whistle Stops III and IV, in which the theatrical action and the interactions between the performers are entirely derived from instrumental performance. In Whistle Stop III, the two performers face one another across a stand with six wood blocks (as in the performance observed here; the score mentions temple blocks or similar instruments as alternatives). Although both players have three blocks associated with them and both start out playing solely on 'their own' blocks, they soon invade 'one another's territory' and include more and more blocks into their respective patterns. The 'scene' is scored in conventional staff notation and consists of convincing musical structures, the realization of which, however, requires the performers to engage in a struggle with one another, trying to avoid one another's sticks while 'scoring hits' on their respective opponent's territory. Indeed, each section begins with a repetition of a musical pattern, which is, however, divided in different ways between the players, with each player playing only on their 'own blocks' at the start, with increasingly complex divisions of notes to follow. In this way, the performers' actions cannot be reduced to the sounding result but attain an independent dimension. The passage ends with the performers grasping one another's sticks, before the Voice of God intervenes. This seems a somewhat conventionally theatrical resolution, although some kind of external interference is probably required to bring the section to a close.

Whistle Stop IV involves a similar struggle over two snare drums (already the setting of Whistle Stop II) and a small bell, with the players alternating to dampen one another's drum rolls with the bell. Before long, they are engaged in elaborate fencing matches with their sticks, using bells like shields, while drumming with their free hands. Since the 'choreography' of this section is rather more complicated, it is notated as a set of verbal instructions, in addition to the staff notation already used in Whistle Stop II.

Throughout the piece, somewhat akin to Kagel's *Sur scène*, a theatrical frame is constructed that guides our perceptions of the musical performance (the Algernon Moncrieff effect). The scenes described explore the borderline between musical and theatrical action and the ensuing moment of metaxis to powerful effect. The closest resemblance here is arguably to Kagel's *Match*. The performers are locked in some kind of struggle, a struggle that is expressed musically but that points to a representational dimension, one that is, however, only alluded to rather than specified.

### *Trond Reinholdtsen*

Among the works discussed here, *Faust, or the Decline of Western Music* (2011) by the Norwegian Trond Reinholdtsen is the most playful and exuberant, if not to say surreal and chaotic. Like Bithell's *Whistle*, Reinholdtsen's *Faust* is a complex multimedia composition, and the different elements are closely related and precisely synched – which does by no means imply that they cohere; on the contrary they often disrupt one another. The work is for one performer, a pianist, who performs a variety of other roles: the score identifies him (!) as Faust, but the audience have no way of

guessing this (the piece was written for Mark Knoop, who also gave the premier). In addition to the performer's actions, there are three further levels: (1) a screen showing a Powerpoint presentation (controlled by the performer with a foot pedal), an animation sequence and end titles like in a feature film (but with Knoop assigned most of the dramatis personae of Goethe's *Faust* and most of the other credits going either to Knoop or Reinholdtsen); (2) sound recordings played from speakers; and (3) what are called 'theatrical effects' in the score, such as colored balls on strings, which begin to appear between the piano's soundboard and lid, neatly correlated with the music, a smoke machine, colored lights and two radio-controlled cars with blaring iPods.

The performance starts with an absurd 'educational lecture on "Cognition and Perception in Contemporary Music"' (as the score describes it) played from speakers. This continues while the pianist enters and sits down at the grand piano. Next piano music is heard from the speakers (which, as the Powerpoint presentation informs us, represents the 'Main Theme'), while the pianist sits still at the keyboard. When he seems finally about to strike a key, he instead slips quietly underneath the piano, to play it from below (the 'Secondary Theme' as the Powerpoint presentation tells us). For the rest of the piece, the connection between piano sound and piano-playing is disrupted: while eventually the pianist will sit down and play from the music on the stand in front of him in more or less conventional fashion, some of the music still comes from speakers, and it is often difficult for the audience to distinguish between the sound sources and connect action with sound.

During the pianist's performance (the 'Development', according to the omniscient Powerpoint presentation), the screen shows a simultaneous analysis of the music, the

extremely formalist and technical nature of which becomes increasingly bizarre. At later stages, there also appear historical paintings of an apocalyptic nature as well as cryptic phrases (e.g. 'TRUTH PROCESS'). The 'theatrical elements' appear relatively late in the 45-minute-long piece; while they first act as rather poetic additions, they soon lead to pandemonium, with the whole performance disintegrating into final chaos – perhaps the 'decline' suggested in the title.

It cannot be my job here to provide a coherent interpretation or analysis of this equally confusing and amusing piece, in particular as regards its references to Liszt (whose bicentenary it celebrates, if that is the word), Goethe and the Faust legend. Rather, as before, my focus is on the mode of performance. There are clear echoes of Kagel's *Sur scène*: the meta-musical conception, the parodied lecture on music (live in the Kagel, from tape in Reinholdtsen) and the simultaneous analysis commenting on the music, or the music acting as an illustration for the analysis. Likewise, the theatrical frame dominates throughout: it is very difficult to focus on the music aesthetically; we mostly hear it on a meta-level. The primary reason for this are the different levels intruding on the performance, such as the Powerpoint presentation, the 'theatrical elements', and the material from tape. But it is also the music itself that discourages aesthetic immersion.

The score describes the music played from the speakers at the beginning (the 'Main Theme') as 'quasi random ... piano music'. Much the same could be said about the music performed live: it sounds like a caricature of high-modernist piano writing, with the pianist struggling hard to produce dense flurries of seemingly random notes and abstract structures, but little that could hold the audience's attention. As a consequence, the intricate formal relationships that the Powerpoint

presentation informs us about appear simply laughable. There are also moments when the parodic intent is unmistakable. In one particular section, the music illustrates ‘Just Noticeable Differences’ (according to the Powerpoint), namely single notes, mostly one per bar, which are held for minutely different lengths within constantly changing meters. At one point, all we hear is just the same single note, but spelled differently (as A sharp and B flat) and held for slightly different durations, and with each bar given a different time signature. Needless to say, in the absence of a perceivable pulse, the rhythmic nuances and changes of meter are totally meaningless.

The ironic commentary between the material on the screen and the music creates a powerful effect of metaxis, akin to the use of music by stand-up comedians: we rarely hear the music as a direct presence, but at least partly on a meta-level, ‘as if’, and the performer never appears purely as a musician, nor quite as an actor impersonating a musician, but as both at the same time or a mixture of the two, oscillating between non-matrixed performance, non-matrixed representation and simple acting. Among the pieces discussed here, *Faust* goes furthest in a theatrical direction, to the point where the music almost no longer matters (‘quasi random piano music’). It does, however, constantly draw attention to the music, and even though it might be difficult for audiences to attend to the music fully aesthetically, their very inability to do so is experienced as frustration, so the lack of a musical frame properly speaking does not reduce the peculiar double-ness or in-between-ness of the experience of metaxis.

## VI. *Sixty Years of Experimental Music Theatre*

These three pieces are in many ways very different, running the gamut from a predominantly musical frame (Fox's *something*) to a predominantly theatrical one (Reinholdtsen's *Faust*) and from relatively homogeneous materials (again Fox's *something*) to a considerable diversity (Bithell, Reinholdtsen). What they have in common is an exploration of different types of performance in terms of Kirby's theory and an exploration of the experience of metaxis arising from the tension between musical and theatrical frames. Again, there are subtle differences. Fox's *something* only stretches the conventions of musical performance slightly and almost imperceptibly, with no clear semantic reference. Reinholdtsen's *Faust*, by contrast, seems designed to confuse audiences as much as possible about the nature of the performance and the role of different media and offering a panoply of cryptic semantic contexts (e.g. *Faust*, Goethe, Liszt). As in other instances, Bithell's work seems to occupy a middle-ground, with a noticeable tension between musical and theatrical frames and hints at an, albeit abstract, representational dimension.

As was suggested, more than at the time of its inception, experimental music theatre today shares the stage with a great variety of related genres, such as installations and concert installations, and some of the pieces discussed here, notably Bithell's *Whistle from Above*, at times go beyond the narrow definition I have established. The increased role of technology has likewise revolutionized the scene in recent decades and has led to qualitatively new approaches. This rich diversity of related genres and technical means makes it all the more important that we are able to distinguish between different forms and approaches and explain their workings in detail. What has been demonstrated above all, however, is that, alongside more



recent developments, the principles of experimental music theatre first established by Cage and Kagel some sixty years ago remain vibrant today.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Rebstock and Roesner (2012) could not be taken into account for this chapter. At the time of writing the book is advertised but not yet available.

<sup>3</sup> There is a competent performance (if in poor picture quality) by Manda Dorj at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4YDBmmO2Aw>> (uploaded 6/07/2011, accessed 13/04/2012). Dorj overlooks one action though, which makes her performance calmer in the central section than it would otherwise be.

<sup>4</sup> Kagel: *Match*. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNmjFvMERD4>>. Uploaded 8/12/2008, accessed 22/01/2012 Ensemble Offspring. *Match* by Mauricio Kagel.

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<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXZb2OKGctM>>. uploaded 16/05/2011,  
accessed 22/01/2012

<sup>5</sup>The composer's own website presents an introduction, full score, photos and a  
video: <[http://www.davidbithell.com/works/theater/whistle\\_from\\_above.html](http://www.davidbithell.com/works/theater/whistle_from_above.html)>.  
Accessed 26/01/2012.