

Lecture Performance: Composer Notes

These composer notes are intended as a supplement to the lecture-performance of their works, providing additional context and background about the composers' lives and ideas.

Mauricio Kagel (1931-2008)

Mauricio Kagel's compositional career was wide ranging and multidisciplinary, ranging from serialist composition to theater works and film. Björn Heile argues that Kagel's pieces use "composition as a means of intellectual inquiry," where the subjective associations of material and stylistic decisions are used to discuss and critique larger societal/cultural issues.¹

Kagel lived in Buenos Aires for the first twenty-six years of his life. During this time, he studied a wide range of artistic disciplines such as film and literature. His mentors included Theodor Fuchs (conductor of the Agrupación Nueva Música), and Jorge Luis Borges (his English instructor and surrealist writer). Kagel was involved in many artistic organizations during his education, such as the Agrupación, the Renaut-Barrault theater company, and the SADE film studio. He met Pierre Boulez in 1953 and showed him several of his student compositions, and Boulez recommended that he study serialism and electronic music in Cologne. When Kagel arrived in Cologne, he quickly integrated himself into the European experimental schools of thought, becoming close friends with Ligeti. He became interested in setting up theatrical relationships between performers, such as in his 1959 piece *Transición II* where a percussionist manipulates piano strings while the pianist is trying to play the instrument.

Kagel was one of the pioneers of a new compositional practice known as "instrumental theater", which highlights musical performance as a theatrical act.² Kagel's earliest works in which these ideas come to the forefront are his 1960 pieces *Sur scène* and *Sonant. Match*, written in 1964, marks the middle of this period in Kagel's creative output. He primarily focused on instrumental theater throughout the 1960s, culminating in the large-scale piece *Staatstheater*, which remains one of his most well-known works. It is a large-scale critique of various operatic/dramatic traditions, and has been called an "anti-opera".³ After this work, while Kagel continued including theatrical elements in his works, his focuses shifted to examining and critiquing other musical traditions such as postmodernism as well as a further emphasis on multimedia work and film.

¹ Björn Heile, *The Music of Mauricio Kagel* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 3.

² Heile, *The Music of Mauricio Kagel*, 4.

³ Heile, *The Music of Mauricio Kagel*, 57.

George Lewis (b. 1952)

George Lewis is a composer, trombonist, and improvisation researcher. He was born in Chicago, and initially studied philosophy at Yale before becoming interested in contemporary music and returning to Chicago. While in Chicago, Lewis participated in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians.⁴ His teachers included Muhal Richard Abrams and Dean Hey. Since 2004, Lewis has been teaching composition and American music at Columbia University, after having taught at UCSD for twelve years.

One of Lewis's most influential contributions to the field of improvisation research is his article "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological perspectives." In this essay, Lewis examines the resurgence of improvisation in Western Classical Music in the mid-20th century, tracing it to the earlier rise in prominence and popularity of Jazz and Bobop in the African American community.⁵ He also claims that as this happened, there was an ongoing effort to distance contemporary classical improvisation from the influence of Jazz improvisation, in order to avoid association with the African American community and maintain their status as "other" – and that this was why many Western Classical composers took up terms such as indeterminacy or aleatoricism instead of improvisation. This led to two notions or approaches to improvisation that Lewis coins with the terms "Afrological" and "Eurological". Eurological improvisation is associated with goals of randomness, while "one important aspect of Afrological improvisation is the notion of the importance of personal narrative, of 'telling your own story.'"⁶ This model of different conceptions of performer agency has been very influential in future research on the subject. Lewis has continued his writing and study of improvisation, editing *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* in 2016 and writing the introductory article for the 2020 book *The Art of Becoming: How Group Improvisation Works*, among other research.

Lewis's compositions are widely varied, from *Shadowgraph* pieces in the 1970s that integrate new notational and interactive techniques into the world of jazz big band to works with live electronics that accompany improvisation. He has frequently partnered with the American Composers Orchestra, which has premiered several of his larger works including *Weathering* in November 2023. *Artificial Life 2007* is one of several pieces by Lewis for indeterminate instrumentation that explore the nature of group improvisation.

⁴ Stevan Key and Benjamin Piekut, "Lewis, George Emanuel," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, accessed March 6, 2024, ed. Deane L. Root, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

⁵ George Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological perspectives," *Black music research journal* 22, no. 1 (2002): 215-246.

⁶ Lewis, 241.

Lawrence “Butch” Morris (1947-2013)

Lawrence “Butch” Morris grew up in Los Angeles as a jazz trumpet player. In addition to performing and improvising, he made song arrangements as part of his work for a recording studio. Morris served as a military medic in Vietnam in 1966, before later returning to California and finally moving to New York in 1976. He gradually became more interested in conducting and group improvisation in the following decade, performing his first official Conduction in 1985. It was titled *Current Trends in Racism in Modern America*, showing how the improvisatory, reactive medium of group improvisation could comment on important social issues.

Morris gradually developed the gestural language of Conduction throughout his career, and after his death some of his friends and collaborators such as Daniela Veronesi, J.A. Deane, and Howard Mandel compiled his manuscripts into the book *The Art of Conduction: A Conduction Workbook*. Morris describes how he found the name “conduction” by combining conducting and improvisation, but realized that the added metaphor of heat transfer (from conduction’s meaning in physics) also deeply related to the way in which he intended conduction to function: as a transfer of ideas, personality, and artistic vision.⁷ Morris imagined conduction as a system that is not bound to any genre conventions or ensemble type. He also developed ways it could work for adapting and interpreting fixed music in new ways, such as a 1984 performance of Beethoven’s op. 130 string quartet in which Morris added rehearsal marks that he asked the players to sustain, loop, and move between using conduction gestures.⁸

Walter Thompson (b. 1952)

Walter Thompson spent much of his childhood and early career in Woodstock, New York, playing drums, guitar, and saxophone with rock bands, jazz groups, and others.⁹ He studied composition with Anthony Braxton, and also explored non-musical forms of improvisation such as dance. From 1974-1980, Thompson met and played jam sessions with students and other composers in the Creative Music School at Woodstock. In 1980 he moved to New York City.

Thompson developed Soundpainting at a similar time to Morris’s Conduction, founding the Walter Thompson Orchestra in 1984. He was looking for a way to transmit information to the orchestra during improvisatory sections and began experimenting with gestural communication. Thompson gradually added more and more gestures to the system, and today there are over 750 total.¹⁰ Unlike Conduction, in which gestures are more genre-independent, some of Thompson’s more fundamental gestures are based on creating specific styles of music, such as minimalism and pointillism. In addition, Thompson has incorporated other artistic mediums into Soundpainting such as dance, visual art, and writing. He has used it as an educational tool with applications not only for group improvisation but also theater, film scoring, and multimedia work.

⁷ Lawrence “Butch” Morris, Massimo Golfieri, and Luciano Rossetti, *The Art of Conduction: A Conduction Workbook*, ed. Daniela Veronesi (New York: Karma, 2017), 187.

⁸ Morris, Golfieri, and Rossetti, *The Art of Conduction: A Conduction Workbook*, 188.

⁹ Walter Thompson, *Soundpainting: The Art of Live Composition* (New York: Walter Thompson, 2006), 12.

¹⁰ Thompson, *Soundpainting: The Art of Live Composition*, 2.

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