

KASPAR
a scene for piano, cello, and cor anglais
by **Alex Nowitz**

Interpreters of the premiere:
Ensemble Mosaik (Berlin):
Ernst Surberg (pno.),
Mathis Mayr (vlc.),
Simon Strasser (c.a.)

The premiere took place
at the fabrik Potsdam, 23 April 2016
as part of the 'intersonanzen 2016'
– an annual new music festival organized by the
'Brandenburgische Verein für Neuen Musik e.V.'

Documentation of the premiere is online:
<https://vimeo.com/169242106>
Video recording: Henry Mex, Micha Schenk, Alex Nowitz
Audio recording: Dietrich Petzold
Video editing: Henry Mex

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Kaspar in all of us?

An Extended Programme Note

What may have happened, inside Kaspar, upon being released from his familiar, lightless hole into the rush of the city and surrendered to the upper class? What frenzies of curiosity may have struck him when he who was used to living in isolation suddenly found himself in so-called society? What kind of dizzy whirl of sensation must have affected him, making him stagger between euphoria, on the one hand, and over-stimulation, on the other? And how may he have reacted when he encountered waves of hate and resentment, and a public gaze that made him into a focal point, an abject spectacle?

The life of the historical figure of Kaspar Hauser is shaped by a very unusual combination of circumstances. What interests me are the ensuing questions that resemble a thought experiment [*Gedankenexperiment*] from the present time investigating the implications of unchecked overstimulation and excessive demands as they exist for modern man.

The composition *Kaspar* poses these questions in and through a musical scene for piano, cello and cor anglais. In addition to the instrument, each of the three musicians uses their voice – either by speaking, singing or whistling, following the Artaudian notion of theatre as acquisition of ‘possibilities for extension from speech outside words’.¹ Moreover, they take on an attitude of refusal by accepting the absence of one sensory perception at a time. By wearing props like the balaclava, as the pianist does, welding goggles for the cellist and ear muffs for the oboist, the senses of hearing, seeing, tasting and smelling are eliminated or, at least, constrained. A composition for *agents of refusal* emerges. This aspect of the composition, which can only be perceived visually, suggests that the work wants not to be *heard* only but to be *seen* as well.

Referring to the Nietzschean credo from *Ecce Homo* ‘I finally want to become who I actually am.’ [*Ich möchte endlich der werden, der ich eigentlich bin.*]² is the first textual approximation to the phenomenon of Kaspar Hauser within the piece. The cellist hisses [*fauchen*] its components with the energy of a dictator. By doing so, the vowels are uttered unvoiced while the sounds of the consonants are exaggerated. Another text fragment consists of two phrases that the pianist whispers into the strings of the piano: ‘schwarze Würmer, lauter’ [black worms, nothing but] and ‘warum fliegen die da?’ [why do they fly there?]. This is an allusion to the theatre play *Faith, Hope, and Charity* (1936) by the German language Austro-Hungarian-born playwright and novelist Ödon von Horvath.³ Another of that kind is the phrase ‘Ich möchte ein solcher werden wie einmal ein anderer gewesen

¹ See ‘The Theatre of Cruelty: First Manifesto’ in Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. by Victor Corti (London: Alma Classics, 2014), p. 63.

² The quote is by myself, although obviously it alludes to the Nietzschean credo and subtitle from *Ecce Homo*: ‘Wie man wird, was man ist’ [How one becomes, what one is (my translation)]. See <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/EH>.

Also note that, throughout the text, I translated the German original indicated by brackets.

³ Renate Voris: *Peter Handke: Kaspar*, Frankfurt am Main/Berlin/Munich: Diesterweg, 1984, p. 21.

ist' [I want to become like another once has been.]⁴ which is a quote that traces back to Peter Handke's theatre play *Kaspar* from 1968 within which the author himself makes reference to what the historical figure of Kaspar Hauser was alleged to have said with a strong accent: 'A söchener Reiter möcht i wärn, wie mei Voter aner gween is.'⁵ [I want to become such a horseman as my father has been].⁶ Within my piece, Peter Handke's quote is obscured by the fact that almost every word of the phrase is distributed among the musicians, each of whom is presenting just one or a few words of it differently, either by shouting, singing, questioning, or speaking with an *unvoiced voice*. Most of the time, the words are subject to a Brechtian distancing effect [*Verfremdungseffekt*] since they are delivered while the musician-performer is simultaneously playing the instrument.

With regard to the composition, all these language fragments, and their decomposed versions, fulfil a threefold function. First and foremost, they serve as additional sound material. Secondly, they represent Kaspar's wishful thinking. Thirdly, they reveal that he lacks the capacity to express himself in a forceful way. What becomes clear, hopefully, is that the border between language and sound is no longer established. In fact, one could say it is dissolved for the sake of a new form of vocal expressivity, one that goes beyond the convention of language as pure linguistic meaning and opens up towards a musical language that, together with visual and body language, gives the whole piece its idiosyncratic *Gestalt*.

'I want finally to become who I actually am.' is the initial and desperate cry for individuation which, together with the limits inscribed therein, actually prevent self-realisation. The line forms the basis of the composition and becomes a central consideration for motivating the musician-characters to produce sound,

⁴ Peter Handke: *Kaspar*, Frankfurt am Main: Edition Suhrkamp, 1968, pp. 13 et seq.

⁵ Voris, p. 19.

⁶ Ibid.

speak, sing, utter, whistle, gesticulate, and to communicate with the co-players onstage as well as with ghosts (as, at one point, the cellist is waving into the darkness of the back of the stage). By doing so, the musician-characters present themselves not only as musicians who play their instruments but also as performers adopting a position onstage that points towards an expanded field of concert music or, saying better, to a music theatre that involves vocality and corporality to the same extent as playing the instruments.⁷ This does not only strengthen the musicians' presence onstage, it also provides them with an agency that is beyond mere music-making and allows them to create a novel theatrical language, arising from music-making practices, which, speaking in terms of Artaud, 'aims to exalt, to benumb, to bewitch, to arrest our sensibility'⁸.

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⁷ For more information on concepts of de-hierarchization see Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby, London: Routledge, 2006, p. 86.: *The de-hierarchization of theatrical means is a universal principle of postdramatic theatre. This non-hierarchical structure blatantly contradicts tradition, which has preferred a hypotactical way of connection that governs the super- and subordination of elements, in order to avoid confusion and to produce harmony and comprehensibility.*

⁸ Artaud, p. 64.