Kurtág's Articulation of Kafka's Rhythms (*Kafka-Fragmente*, op. 24)

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In one of his journal entries from December of 1911, following a concert that included several of Brahms' choral works as well as the *Tragic Overture*, Franz Kafka comments on what he calls his "lack of musicality":

> Das Wesentliche meiner Unmusikalität, daß ich Musik nicht zusammenhängend genießen kann, nur hie und da entsteht eine Wirkung in mir, und wie selten ist die eine musikalische. Die gehörte Musik zieht natürlich eine Mauer um mich, und meine einzig dauernde musikalische Beeinflussung ist die, daß ich, so eingesperrt, anders bin als frei.[1]

Readers of Kafka's writings are continually challenged by unexpected juxtapositions, which allow for multiple interpretations. In the journal entry he immediately proceeds to contrast the deferential attitude of the public toward music with its lack of any such reverence for literature. Is he implying that the deferential listeners who are capable of enjoying music coherently are less likely than he is to feel sequestered by the effects of music? How are we to understand the relation between Kafka's susceptibility to "non-musical" effects and the wall that music drew around him? (At least his desire for the freedom that music denies him seems clear enough.)

More than once in his journals, Kafka remarks upon connections between melodic inflections and physical gestures in such familiar venues of Jewish life in Prague as synagogues, theatres, offices, and drawing rooms.[2] At the 1911 Brahms concert, his attention sometimes fastened on the attitudes and postures of other listeners, and he found it "instructive"

[1] Kafka, *Tagebücher*, p. 139: "The essence of my lack of musicality: that I am incapable of enjoying music coherently. Only once in a while does a response spring forth within me – and how infrequently is this effect a musical one. The music I hear, as a matter of course erects a wall around me, and the only lasting impression music makes on me is that, sequestered in this manner, I am in no sense free."

[2] Kafka, *Tagebücher*, pp. 54f, 61, 62, 78, 79, 84 *et passim*.

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(*lehrreich*) to observe different groups of performers taking the lead as "the music" was passed among them. In the ninety years that have elapsed since that concert, countless listeners have distinguished, as Kafka did, between "musical" and "non-musical" effects; others have rejected or modified that distinction and have experienced a wide range of responses to music as, indeed, "musical."

If Kafka were to return to life and ask us how he might learn to "enjoy music coherently" – starting, perhaps, with Kurtág's op. 24 –, I would urge him *not* to suppress responses that some might call "non-musical." Should the reborn Kafka ask me to comment on the critical literature that has grown up around op. 24, I would first express whole-hearted agreement with István Balázs's statement that "the unity of the cycle … is constantly in play on the frontier between dispersion and coherence."[3] I do not share Stephen Walsh's impression that the work is "a bit like an album of snapshots all taken at one wedding"[4] – unless, perhaps, we imagine an exceptionally boisterous group of wedding guests captured by an ubiquitous and uninhibited photographer. Friedrich Spangemacher's statement that the form of the work is determined less by the principle of contrast than by the principle of deflection (*Abbiegung*)[5] leaves me somewhat uncertain of how he means to distinguish between contrast and deflection.

I first heard Kurtág's *Kafka-Fragmente* in November 1998 when I attended performances on two consecutive evenings by Phyllis Bryn-Julson and Violaine Melançon at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. I was immediately struck by the ways in which Kurtág had organised the fragments he selected from Kafka's *Tagebücher*, *Octavhefte*, and other writings so as to highlight affinities and contrasts in the verbal rhythms and the topics. Each of Kurtág's vocal cycles juxtaposes images that ring changes on a few topics, such as variable states of water and of atmosphere in *József Attila töredékek*, op. 20: the waters of a sea of tears (16), water swelling into ice (1), a fine dust that fuzzes the pond (17), floating mould (14), sweet breezes (8), an evening soft as a grape (11). In *Kafka-Fragmente* a larger configuration includes objects that may or may not facilitate motion and barriers that prove penetrable or transitory such as two walking-sticks with different mottos (I. 15), the rope suspended above the true path which

[3] Balázs, *But*, p. 178.
[4] Walsh, *Berlin*, p. 43.
[5] Spangemacher, *Weg*, p. 30.

makes one stumble (II), the leaves that cover the pathway again as soon as it has been swept clean (I. 2), "the ceiling of our room" which does not keep the great horse from breaking through (III. 11), the temple which leopards break into so often that they become part of the ceremony (IV. 5), the imagined armor that encloses the protagonist for no more than a moment (I. 14).

The 40 fragments in Kurtág's op. 24 use 38 texts, two of which are set twice (nos. 5 and 9 of Part Three being 'doubles' of, respectively, nos. 11 and 3 in Part One). Twelve of the 38 texts are taken from the *Tagebücher*, twelve from the third and fourth *Octavhefte*, eleven from other fragments and aphorisms printed in the same volume as the *Octavhefte*, and one each from Kafka's letters to Oskar Pollock, Felice Bauer, and Milena Jesenská (see *Table 1*). The texts in the three central columns of Table 1 are printed in the volume of Max Brod's edition of Kafka's writings that also contains *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*, but none of the texts selected by Kurtág forms a part of that narrative.[6]

Table 1: The texts of Kurtág's *Kafka-Fragmente*, op. 24

	Tagebücher	Betrachtungen	Octavhefte	Fragmente	Briefe
I. 1			3: 64		
I. 2		15	3: 60		
I. 3		26a	3: 61		
I. 4				171	
I. 5				172	
I. 6				198	
I. 7	9				
I. 8				171	
I. 9	11				
I. 10	9				
I. 11	12				
I. 12	10				
I. 13				205	
I. 14	24				
I. 15				204	
I. 16		5	3: 54		
I. 17	21				
I. 18				198	
I. 19				170	
II.		1	3: 52		
III. 1		35	3: 64		

[6] *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen* is erroneously described as one source of the texts in Spangemacher, *KdG* and Spangemacher, *Weg*, p. 30.

	Tagebücher	Betrachtungen	Octavhefte	Fragmente	Briefe
III. 2	231				
III. 3				305	
III. 4					*an Milena*, p. 208
III. 5	12				
III. 6	234				
III. 7		26b	3: 61	220	
III. 8		21			
III. 9		26a	3: 61		
III. 10		52	3: 67		
III. 11			3: 76		
III. 12	9				
IV. 1	238				
IV. 2					*1902–1924*, p. 22
IV. 3		43	3: 66		
IV. 4	119				
IV. 5		20	3: 61		
IV. 6					*an Felice*, p. 400
IV. 7				198	
IV. 8			4: 86		

Note: Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande, und andere Prosa aus dem Nachlaß, Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 1953, includes *Betrachtungen über Sünde, Leid, Hoffnung und den wahren Weg* (first published as such 1931), pp. 30–40; *Octavheft 3*, pp. 52–78; *Octavheft 4*, pp. 78–96; *Fragmente aus Heften und losen Blättern*, pp. 163–302; and *Paralipomena*, pp. 303–314.

The 38 texts, as printed, contain 1103 syllables, unequally distributed (the marvellous Eduardowa scene that closes Part Three requires 146). Two- thirds of the texts have 32 or fewer syllables (see *Table 2*).

Table 2: Number of syllables in the texts as printed

3		I. 4
7		III. 6
8		I.19
11	(7 + 4)	III. 3
12	(6 + 3 + 3)	I. 5
	(6 + 6)	I. 9
13	(7 + 6)	I. 10
	(6 + 4 + 3)	I. 14
14	(8 + 6)	III. 10
16	(8 + 8)	I. 8 and III. 2
17	(3 + 3 + 3 + 3 + 5)	I. 11 = III. 5
	(5 + 4 + 5 + 3)	I. 12
	(4 + 5 + 5 + 3)	III. 7
19	(6 + 5 + 8)	I. 18
	(7 + 8 + 4)	I. 13
23	(6 + 7 + 10)	I. 7

	(8+7+8)	I. 16
24	(5+6+6+7)	I. 2
	(5+3+7+9)	III. 1
25	(3+3+3+3+7+6)	IV. 7
26	(3+3+8+3+9)	I. 6
28	(4+4+8+7+5)	I. 1
	(9+9+10)	IV. 3
31	(8+5+9+9)	I. 3 = III. 9
32	(8+7+7+10)	IV. 8
35	(7+9+3+9+7)	I. 15
36	(11+13+12)	I. 17
	(11+13+8+4)	IV. 2
	(8+6+11+8+3)	III. 8
43	(9+9+8+10+7)	II
	(3+8+4+13+12+3)	IV. 4
47	(9+10+8+11+9)	III. 11
49	(11+9+9+10+5+5)	IV. 5
	(9+7+13+10+10)	IV. 6
52	(9+4+10+7+10+6+6)	IV. 1
56	(11+14+7+9+11+4)	III. 4
146		III. 12

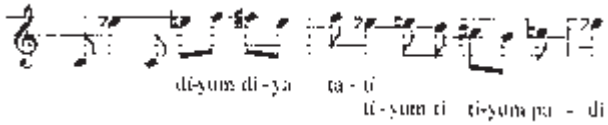
One of the major variables is the extent to which, in a given fragment, the sequence of accents approaches the predictability of conventional verse meters. At one extreme are outbursts like *Nein! Nein! Nein!* and lines like *fährt wie überall so auch in der Elektrischen in Begleitung zweier Violinisten*; at the opposite extreme are lines that attain considerable momentum by replicating a fixed sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables:

> und es war eine sehr lange Liebesgeschichte (IV. 3)
> Im Kampf zwischen dir und der Welt sekundiere der Welt. (III. 10)
> Wir krochen durch den Staub, ein Schlangenpaar (IV. 8)
> Zu spät. Die Süssigkeit der Trauer und der Liebe (IV. 1)
> das wiederholt sich immer wieder / schliesslich kann man es vorausberechnen (IV. 5)
> Aber auch in jene Weite führt der Weg. (III. 8)

In such cases we may wish to apply the terms of traditional prosodic analysis to lines from Kafka's diaries. Other factors being equal – as they so rarely are – we are apt to perceive a higher degree of animation or excitement in iambic lines like *Ich kann nicht eigentlich erzählen* and *Die Guten gehn im gleichen Schritt* than in trochaic lines like *Staunend sahen wir das große*

Pferd and *Der begrenzte Kreis ist rein*, which tend to evoke more dignified movements or more stable postures. Other lines resemble, or stand at a distance from, these models to the extent that word boundaries coincide, or fail to coincide, with divisions of feet – a significant issue that cannot be adequately addressed here. The conventional opposition between relatively more animated iambic rhythms and relatively more stolid trochaic rhythms is worth recalling, in as much as the texts in *Kafka-Fragmente* evoke such a wide spectrum of motions, extending all the way to refusals or incapacities to move (e.g., *Meine Gefängnißzelle – meine Festung*). The rhythms of Kafka's language embody the movements – and the failures to move – that it names. Kurtág's composition projects and dramatises these movements.

The number of syllables in a group is just as important as the distribution of stressed syllables. This is one implication of the position argued by Karl Philipp Moritz in 1786, that German poetry is characterised by "a double relationship" (*einen doppelten Zusammenhang*): although the meanings of words depend on a stress accent that subordinates weak syllables to strong syllables, poetic meters create a different grouping of syllables and allow us to give "equal" value to every syllable and to each of its components.[7] In the *Kafka-Fragmente*, as in any vocal work, two adjacent phrases that have exactly or approximately the same number of vocal attacks are comparable in several respects: the number of different pitch classes in each phrase, identity or difference in the intervals of time separating each attack, similarity or difference in the sequence of vowel timbres, similar or contrasting consonants in stressed positions, and so on. In the master classes at Balatonföldvár we heard Kurtág representing sequences of string attacks with appropriate contrasts of vowels and consonants (*Example 1*). Kurtág's musicality seeks engagement



Example 1: Bartók, *Fifth String Quartet,* first movement, mm. 26–27, syllables devised by Kurtág for first violin line

[7] Moritz, *Versuch*, p. 41: "jede Silbe ist nun an und für sich herrschend, und ein Ganzes, welches wieder seine Bestandtheile, die einzelnen Laute, hat, die *auch* nun gleichsam *geweihet* und veredelt worden sind, und daher, einer wie der andre, ihren vollen Ton haben müssen; keine Silbe, kein Laut darf nun mehr durch den andern gedrängt werden."

with the rhythmic and timbral resources of many languages; his music projects verbal rhythms and sets them contrapuntally against other patterns.

It is common for the grouping of accents to shift within a single fragment. In the eighth fragment of Part One, the initial dactylic sequence becomes trochaic as the protagonist shakes off whoever has grabbed his sleeve: *Es zupfte mich jemand am Kleid / aber ich schüttelte ihn ab*.[8] One of the most intense contrasts is the thrice-repeated opposition between an amphibrach, *geschlafen*, and an anapest, *aufgewacht* (in I. 11 and III. 5). While I expect to find a tight control of such small-scale rhythmic changes in the prose of, say, Beckett or Joyce or Hemingway, I would not have looked for it in Kafka's diaries before Kurtág's composition opened my ears to the musicality of Kafka's prose.

My error lay in failing to grasp the implications of a point articulated by Mallarmé more than a century ago:

> Dans le genre appelé prose, il y a des vers, quelquefois admirables, de tous rythmes. Mais, en vérité, il n'y a pas de prose: il y a l'alphabet et puis des vers plus ou moins serrés.[9]

Kafka's rhythms tend to become "plus serrés" when he is composing aphorisms or representing one character's emotional appeal to another. In *Der Proceß*, for example, we may hear K's plea for assistance in finding his way out of the chancellery as an arietta in two parts, of 19 and 27 syllables respectively:

> [I] ich werde Ihnen nicht viel Mühe machen,
> es ist ja auch kein langer Weg,
> [II] führen Sie mich nur zur Tür,
> ich setze mich dann noch ein wenig auf die Stufen
> und werde gleich erholt sein.[10]

A few pages later, K's feeling of seasickness is narrated through a rather spasmodic rhythm of interrupted dactyls:

> Es war ihm als stürze das Wasser gegen die Holzwände,
> als komme aus der Tiefe des Ganges ein Brausen her, wie von überschlagendem

[8] This fragment was also set by Hermann Heiss (1897–1966) in his *Expression K: 13 Gesänge nach Worten von Franz Kafka* (1953), which I have not seen. Spangemacher [*Weg*, p. 30] points out that five texts are common to both works: "Träumend sahen wir das große Pferd" (Heiss no. 1, Kurtág I. 18), "Schlage deinen Mantel hoher Traum" (Heiss no. 2, Kurtág I. 5), "Es zupfte mich jemand am Kleid" (Heiss no. 3, Kurtág I. 8), "Nimmermehr" (Heiss no. 11, Kurtág I. 6), and "Wiederum" (Heiss no. 12, Kurtág IV. 7). Ernst Krenek's *Fünf Lieder nach Worten von Franz Kafka*, op. 82 (1937–38) also includes one of the texts set by Kurtág, "Noch spielen die Jagdhunde im Hof."

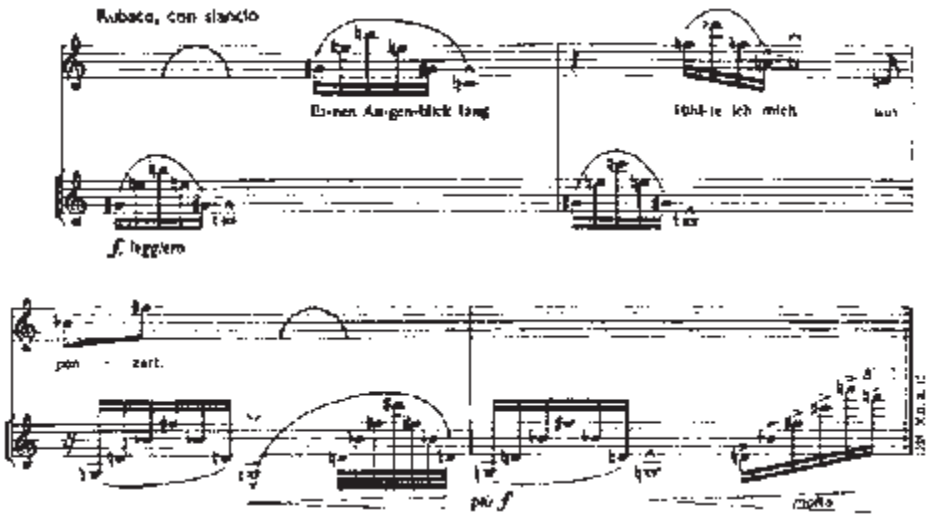
[9] Mallarmé, *Évolution*, p. 867: "In the genre known as prose, there are verses, admirable at times, in all sorts of rhythms. But the truth is that prose does not exist – we have the alphabet and then verses of greater or lesser compactness." Mallarmé's position on this point is discussed by Calasso, *Gods*, pp. 123–141.

[10] Kafka, *Proceß*, p. 81.

Wasser,
als schaukle der Gang in der Quere…[11]

The fragments selected by Kurtág for his op. 24 cover a broad range of rhythmic situations, some of which echo one another across the work. In Part Four, the penultimate fragment opens with five repetitions of the word *wiederum*, the first three in a triplet rhythm the violin has already played no less than 19 times (and will replicate many more times). The remaining syllables form trochaic lines of varying length: *weit verbannt* / *Berge, Wüste, weites Land / gilt es zu durchwandern*. These are sung twice with three more interpolations of *wiederum*. Both the imagery and the prosody of this fragment echo those of the sixth fragment of Part One, where initial repetitions of *nimmermehr* are likewise followed by trochees: *kehrst du wieder in die Städte* and *tönt die grosse Glocke über dir*.[12] When we first hear *nimmermehr* at the beginning of fragment 6, we may well remember the similar rhythm of *ruhelos*, which was the entire text of fragment 4.

A second major variable in Kurtág's articulation of Kafka's prose rhythms has already been briefly mentioned: the extent to which the singer's rhythmic figures are announced, supported, or echoed by the violin. A third is the presence, or absence of brief melismas or extended vocalises such as



Example 2: Kurtág, 'Umpanzert,' *Kafka-Fragmente*, op. 24

[11] Kafka, *Proceß*, p. 84.

[12] As mentioned in note 8 above, the "Nimmermehr" and "Wiederum" texts are juxtaposed as nos. 11 and 12 of Heiss's *Expression K*.

those of the final fragment. A fourth is the correlation, or lack of correlation, between shifts in text rhythm and shifts from one group of tones to another.

Consider fragment 14 in Part One: *Einen Augenblick lang fühlte ich mich umpanzert* (*Example 2*). Each of the first two accented syllables is preceded by two unaccented syllables; we might hear the group as two anapaests. The accented syllables fall on the highest and lowest notes of the singer's first figure, which we have already heard from the violin, and the lowest note has by far the longest duration. The singer's second figure is a reduction of the first, deleting the first two unaccented syllables of the prosodic figure, but deleting the first and last tones (rather than the first two) of the melodic contour. The second melodic figure has three pitch classes rather than four, as does the third figure, in which the three syllables form an amphibrach. As we become more familiar with the work, we may note that all pitches in the vocal line belong to a chain of nine thirds, represented in my *Figure 1* as part of a larger cycle of 36 notes in which two major thirds are followed by a minor third and so on. John Clough's paper mentions the repeated interval pairs in the *Wind Quintet*, op. 2; the cycle in Fig. 1 has twelve repetitions of a sequence of *three* intervals: major third, major third, minor third, or 4–4–3. In the second half of the fragment, the violin shifts to a higher location in the same cycle. Kafka's sensation of being enclosed in armour, if only for a moment, is dramatised by two chains of thirds belonging to one and the same cycle, portions of which are heard at several other points in the work (some of them marked in Fig. 1). In *Die Walküre* the magic fire

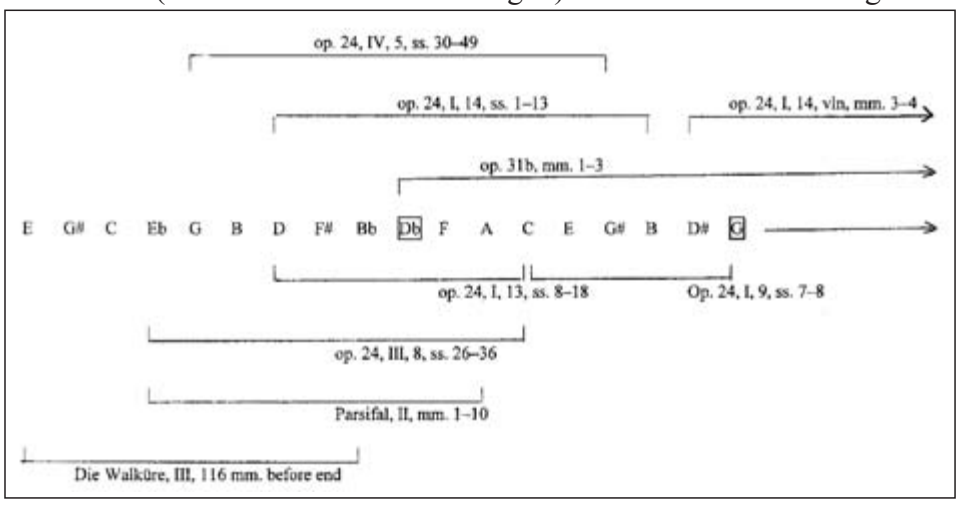


Figure 1/1

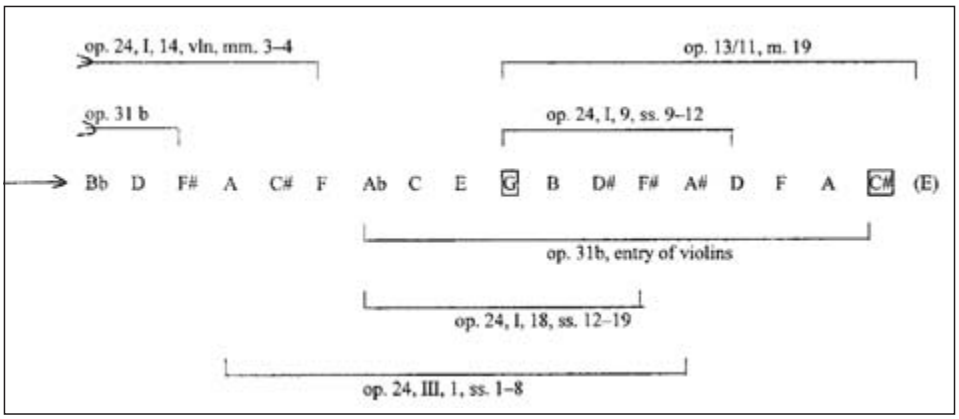


Figure 1/2

that will surround Brünnhilde for considerably longer that a moment is conjured up by a nine-tone segment of the same cycle, which Wagner used again with reference to magic in the second act of *Parsifal* and which became Messiaen's third mode of limited transposition.

Kurtág's interest in such cycles may be understood as one of the numerous specific corollaries of his famous remark that his mother tongue is Bartók and Bartók's mother tongue was Beethoven. *Figure 2* shows two chains of thirds in Beethoven's music, each of them a segment of 18 thirds taken from the cycle of 24 notes in which major and minor thirds occur in alternation. Any six adjacent thirds in this cycle will yield a diatonic scale, such as the C-flat major scale that John Clough hears in the first of the *Kafka Fragments*, as "the others" dance around "the good." The segment is pre-

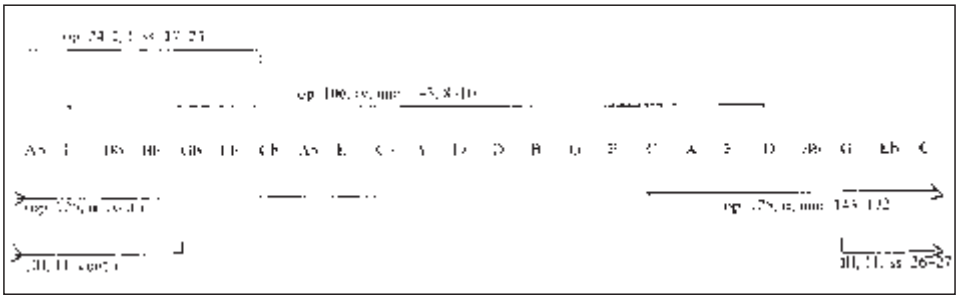
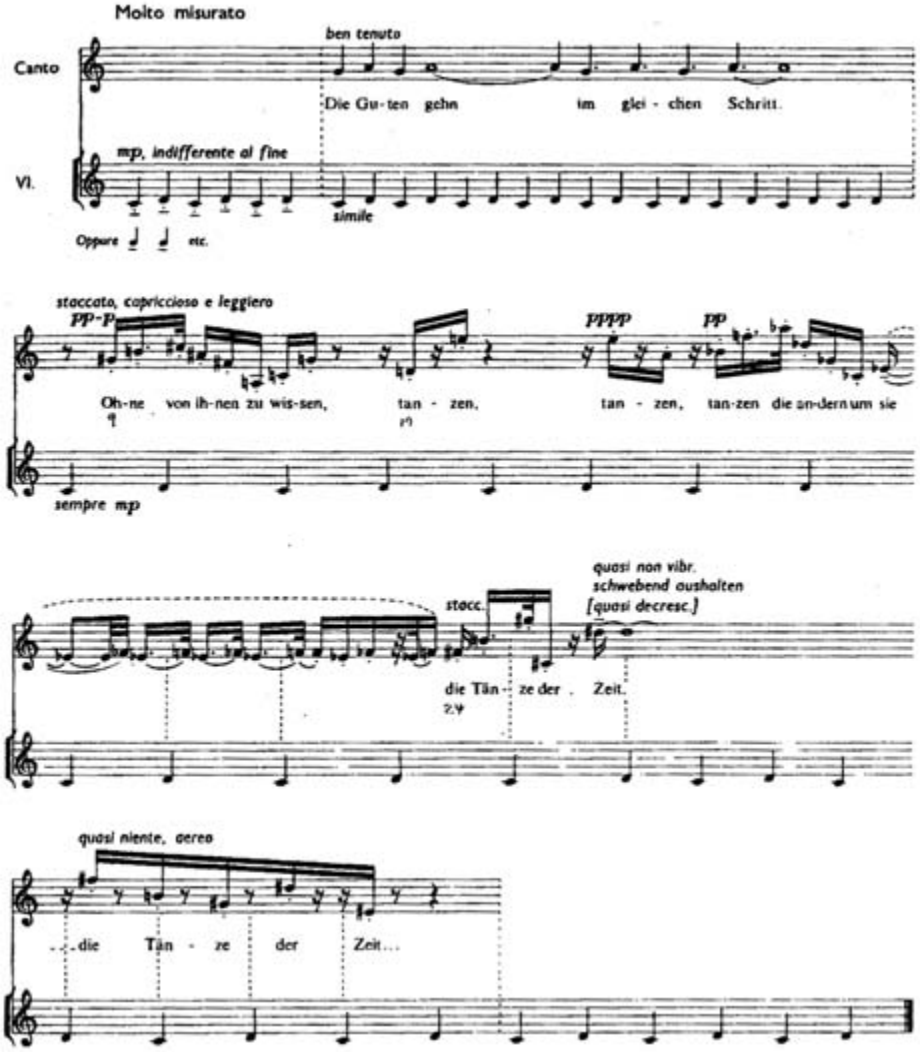


Figure 2

ceded and followed by portions of yet another cycle, in which each major third is followed by two minor thirds – the opposite of the cycle in Fig. 1



Example 3: Kurtág, 'Die Guten gehn im gleichen Schritt,' *Kafka-Fragmente*, op. 24

where each minor third is followed by two major thirds. The cycles in Figs 1 and 2 cannot be transposed, but the cycle in *Figures 3a–b* exists in two forms – one for each version of the whole-tone scale, we might say.

In one respect, the prosody of the first fragment (*Example 3*) moves in the opposite direction from the prosody of the fourteenth fragment. We hear the first four syllables as two iambs – *Die Guten gehn* – followed by another two – *im gleichen Schritt*; an irregular sequence of stresses at this point

would undermine the meaning, which is reinforced by the initial hard *g*'s of the first three stressed syllables (*Guten*, *gehn*, *gleichen*). With *ohne von ihnen zu wissen* the iambs are replaced by a group of dactyls, sung to the ten notes bracketed in *Figure 3*. This group is also replicated – *tanzen die andern um sie* – but *tanzen* is sung three times, the first point at which Kurtág has repeated any of Kafka's syllables. With the third *tanzen* we shift to the segment

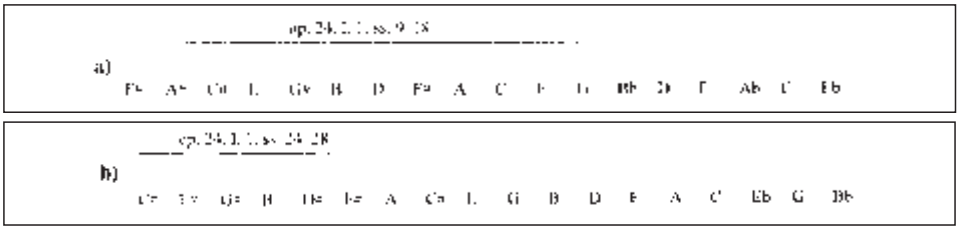


Figure 3

bracketed on the cycle in Fig. 2. The final group of five syllables, sung twice, echoes the initial iambic groups in having only two stressed syllables rather than three, but resembles the dactylic feet in that two weak syllables come between the two accents. The six pitches to which these ten syllables are sung are bracketed on the transposed form of the cycle in Fig. 3b.

I do not wish to suggest that relationships among tones in Kurtág's op. 24 depend above all else on the cycles represented in my Figs 1, 2, and 3 – though the cycle of Fig. 1 is a pervasive presence, in this work and in others.[13] In fragment 17 of Part One, 17 of the 23 chords in the violin postlude are drawn from this cycle. Each of the last six syllables of fragment 9 in Part One is sung on a vocalise of six notes as the violin maintains a G pedal in four octaves. The first two vocalises use the five notes to the left of G in Fig. 1, and the remaining four use the five notes to the right of a different G. If each six-note series, symmetrically arranged to the left and right of a different G, were extended by another six notes, we would have two symmetrical twelve- note series. As it happens, the *Ligatura-Message to Frances-Marie*, op. 31/b, opens with seven four-note chords that move through the twelve-note series extending to the right between D-flat and F-sharp, and the seven four-note chords played by the violins at their entry are drawn from the twelve-note series extending to the left from the final C-sharp of Fig. 1.

During his master classes at Balatonföldvár, Kurtág worked intensively with the members of the superb Auer Quartet on the stacks of thirds that

[13] For example the final chord in the eleventh Microlude, op. 13, is composed of the ten notes marked in Fig. 1.

dominate the third movement of Bartók's *Fifth Quartet* – an indication, perhaps, that he hears such sonorities in relation both to earlier practice and to the creative possibilities explored in his own work. Whatever inertia or momentum develops as one pattern of stresses is replicated, or as a progression continues through more and more segments of an interval cycle, we know that – in Kurtág's music – interruptions of one or both are imminent. We live, we experience the world by connecting fragments. Composers serve us best when they challenge our rhythmic habits with sequences that require us to discover new passages from one gesture to others.

Peter Hoffmann treats the opening measures of Kurtág's *String Quartet*, op. 1 as articulating the situation that results from four of Gregor Samsa's actions in Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*:

> er scheute nicht die große Mühe, einen Sessel zum Fenster zu schieben, dann die Fensterbrüstung hinaufzukriechen, und, in den Sessel gestemmt, sich ans Fenster zu lehnen, offenbar nur in irgendeiner Erinnerung an das Befreiende, das früher für ihn darin gelegen war, aus dem Fenster zu schauen.

Of the five verbs in this sentence – *scheuen*, *schieben*, *hinaufkriechen*, *lehnen* and *schauen* – the one that first interrupts the euphonious sequence of *scheuen – schieben – schauen* may also recall to our ear the final verb of the *Kafka-Fragmente*: "Wir *krochen* durch den Staub, ein Schlangenpaar." Hoffmann interprets the first four sonorities of the quartet with reference to four aspects of Gregor Samsa's situation – respectively, light falling through the window, Samsa as an insect crouching against the window, the purity of the light, and the dirt that surrounds Samsa.[14] Whatever one's response to this interpretation, it would be difficult to take issue with Hoffmann's conclusion that

> Musikalische Substanz und existentieller Gehalt sind in der Musik György Kurtágs eng miteinander verschränkt[15]

unless one refused to separate "musical substance" from "existential content" in the first place and preferred not to argue with those who insist on making and enforcing such divisions. Kurtág's example shows us that, whether or not we choose to argue with them, we need not emulate them.[16]

[14] Hoffmann, *Kakerlake*, p. 45.

[15] Hoffmann, *Kakerlake*, p. 48.

[16] In revising this paper, I have benefited from comments made by Prof. Dr. Martin Zenck and by Balázs Mikusi, to both of whom I am most grateful.

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