

## Music Theatre and Presence in Some Works of György Kurtág

Alan E. WILLIAMS  
Salford

Given that there are no works for the stage by Kurtág, and that his long-time collaborator Adrienne Csengery has reported that Kurtág positively suppressed any tendency towards the theatrical gesture in her performance, using the word ‘stage’ purely in a pejorative sense, you may wonder what I’ve got to talk about.<sup>1</sup> Asking why there are no music theatre pieces in Kurtág’s *oeuvre*, you might say, is rather like asking why there is no church music by Bartók. There just isn’t any: it’s a non-question.<sup>2</sup> Yet this same question appears frequently in the discourse surrounding Kurtág’s music, music which is frequently described as possessing ‘dramatic’ qualities. In an interview between István Balázs and Adrienne Csengery, which took place in 1985, Csengery describes Kurtág’s music as “camouflaged operas”,<sup>3</sup> and this phrase is subsequently picked up by Paul Griffiths in his *Modern Music and After*,<sup>4</sup> as well as by Péter Halász in his 1995 article for *Holmi*, ‘Kurtág Töredékek’,<sup>5</sup> amongst others. Indeed, the tone of the original 1985 interview reveals that Balázs will not relinquish a certain *idée fixe* about the theatrical qualities of Kurtág’s music, and he poses a series of questions to expose this idea. Csengery responds initially by stating emphatically that she and Kurtág did not discuss the visual or theatrical nature of the music of the *Trussova* cycle (“We didn’t think about the staging. Never... Kurtág never bothers himself with the stage. On the contrary.” etc), and then moves firstly to a position where she grants that the vocal cycles, such as the *Trussova* cycle, the *Scenes from a Novel* (op. 19), and the *Attila József Fragments* were, or presented

<sup>1</sup> Balázs, in Spangemacher (1986).

<sup>2</sup> This in spite of Bartók’s joining the Unitarian Church in 1934 (source: Unitarian Church of Hungary).

<sup>3</sup> Balázs, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Griffiths, p. 283.

<sup>5</sup> Halász (1995).

‘dramas,’ and finally to the point where she concedes that Kurtág himself “in the depths of his soul is clear that he writes dramas.” She then coins the term “camouflaged operas” for the piano works, prompting Balázs to ask why there are no “true” operas. Csengery responds by tracing this absence to the lack of suitable libretti, subsequently revealing that Kurtág has made numerous sketches towards an opera, and that she and her husband had actively sought out suitable texts for an opera libretto, including Samuel Beckett’s *short plays*.<sup>6</sup>

Whether one agrees with the position Balázs and Csengery negotiate or not – that there is a ‘latent’ theatricality in the music – one has to wonder what it is in Kurtág’s work that prompts this insuperable conviction in István Balázs that the music is a kind of *repressed theatre*, or as Adrienne Csengery puts it, “camouflaged opera”. Why not simply take Kurtág’s stated opposition to the stage gesture – up to the 1985 interview, at least – at face value?

Obviously there is a difference between ‘drama’ and ‘theatricality’ in music, drama being conventionally detected by analogy in works of an otherwise ‘abstract’ nature – the concerto form, for example – and ‘theatricality’ giving the sense of physical gesture on stage, as well as having the potentially pejorative connotation which Csengery says Kurtág takes from the word ‘stage.’ Why not, then, simply say that Kurtág composes ‘dramas’ in the sense that a Schumann *Liederkreis* is a drama? In the interview I’ve been describing, Csengery concedes immediately a “latent drama,” which would correspond with the latent drama of a Romantic song cycle, but this is not enough for Balázs, who begins the line of questioning by speaking of a “tendency towards outbreak onto the stage,” thus seeking the *theatrical* rather than the simply *dramatic* in Kurtág. Following Balázs, I believe that, while it is not an overriding concern of Kurtág’s music, a certain tendency towards the theatrical, the overblown, the exaggerated gesture has always been present, and moreover, according to some scholars, seems to have been becoming more prominent in recent years: Rachel Beckles Willson, for example, has detected a sense of theatre in some of the later works, including *Grabstein Für Stephan* (op. 15b) and ... *pas à pas – nulle part...* (op. 36), which latter piece she describes as a “implicit, secret pantomime,”<sup>7</sup> and Michael Kunkel describes the epilogue of Kurtág’s op. 30a as an “*acte sans pa-*

<sup>6</sup> Balázs, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Beckles Willson, R. (2000).

roles.”<sup>8</sup> I want to examine the beginnings of this later, if minor, concern with the theatrical aspect of music, and also discuss the consequences of the use of music theatre, or as I shall term it, ‘theatre of music’ for Kurtág’s aesthetic.

### Music theatre / theatre of music

Kurtág has long been concerned with the musical gesture, which is often indicated through expressive markings such as *scorrevole* and *ruvido*, but he has also been concerned since the early seventies more precisely with the physical gestures made by the performer. In a pedagogical method that seems to reverse the normal order of events, Kurtág’s *Játékok* start with the gesture, without worrying about the notes themselves, aiming to encourage play with unconventional parts of the hand, in order to give the young student of the piano a sense of physical confidence with the instrument. There is a clearly articulated didactic purpose to this concentration on what conventionally is regarded as the external, the inessential, and a footnote in volume 1 of *Játékok* makes this purpose clear:

The pieces ‘Walking,’ ‘Toddling,’ ‘Bored,’ ‘Let’s be Silly’ were composed for small children, who cannot span the whole keyboard when seated. They may therefore play them standing or walking – in a ‘silly,’ joking manner (...adults may also play them in this way...).

<sup>9</sup>

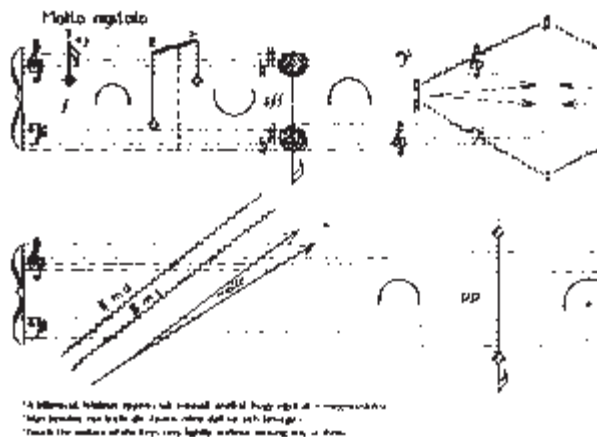
But even in this first volume of *Játékok*, one can see Kurtág beginning to think about the performer’s situation on stage, about the nature of performance itself: ‘Unottan’ [Bored] for example requires the player to amble “to and fro alongside the keys”, and later “walk beyond the keyboard absent-mindedly, then return suddenly with rage.” ‘Némajáték (Veszekedés 2)’ [Dumb Show (Quarrelling 2)], in a kind of absent trace of the first ‘Veszekedés,’ instructs the player for the duration of the piece to “touch the surface of the keys very lightly, without moving any of them” (*Example 1*).

Obviously the main purpose of such pieces is the development of a sense of the expressive potential of the piano, without being hampered by concern for the notes alone, but these two extreme examples show how, in the safe environment of pedagogical pieces, Kurtág is prepared to explore the physical gesture of the musician, not in this case on the stage, but certainly before an audience of at least one. Here we move beyond the musical gesture and on towards what one might call the ‘theatre of music.’ The po-

<sup>8</sup> Kunkel (2001).

<sup>9</sup> *Játékok*, vol.1, p. 7A.

tential is here for a performance in which the very act of the musician's being on stage is seen as being theatrical, as in certain works by John Cage and



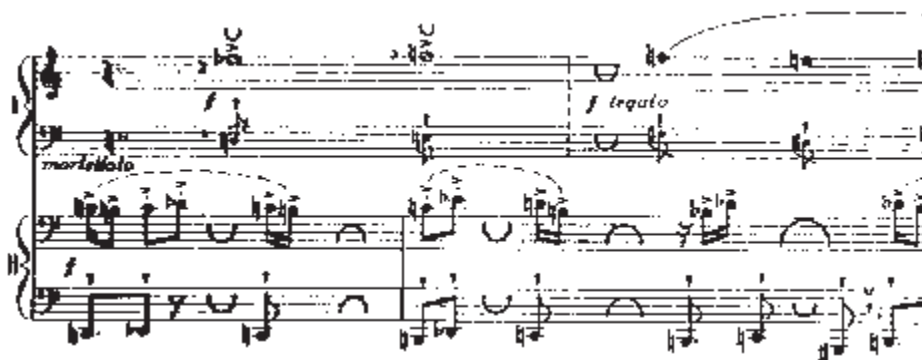
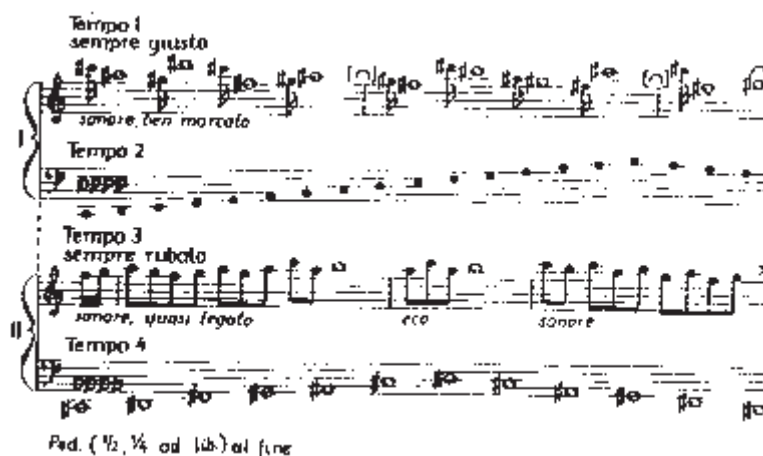
Example 1: 'Némajáték (Veszekedés 2),' *Játékok*, vol. 1

Mauricio Kagel.<sup>10</sup>

### The symbolic and the real embrace

Kurtág's *Transcriptions from Machaut to Bach* are frequently performed interspersed with selections from *Játékok*, and their role in Kurtág's *oeuvre* is rather similar. Piano duets have always been an important part of learning the instrument, but duets for four hands also have traditionally been a congenial activity between friends or family members. In an interview with Bálint András Varga, Kurtág has remembered two formative experiences which took place in early childhood: dancing waltzes and tangos with his mother, and playing duets with four hands with his her. Whenever Kurtág uses the waltz form in his own music, such as in *Scenes from a Novel*, and in the *Kafka Fragments*, it is clearly with a sense of sardonic humour, but there is also usually a strong sense of nostalgia, both for a lost innocence, and one can speculate, for the intimacy of these early experiences. A similar exploration of the physical intimacy of the piano duet situation appears in the *Transcriptions*, and in the fourth volume of *Játékok*, which consists of piano duets. These duets often involve the players encroaching on each others' territory,

<sup>10</sup> Griffiths, p. 181.

Example 2: 'Dühös korál,' *Játékok*, vol. IVExample 3: 'Kéz a kézben,' *Játékok*, vol. IV

as in 'Dühös korál' [Furious Chorale], or, as the title of 'Kéz a kézben' [Hand in hand] suggests, by playing literally overlapping lines (Examples 2 and 3).

Sometimes this idea extends to what one might term a symbolic embrace, in which the lower hand of the *primo* plays lower than the higher hand of the *secundo*. The players must overlap, and must be more than usually sensitive to each other's position on the piano stool. In the transcriptions this can be found in *Die Sieben Worte*, fragments and pieces by Heinrich Schütz (numbers 1, 2 and 7), and in the 'Introit' from the Schütz *Matthaeus Passion*. In the fourth number from this latter piece ('Die Jünger Jesu') there are several variations, with the voices transposed at various octaves, demanding that the pianists play in a number of positions in relation to each other (Example 4).



Example 4: 'Die Jünger Jesu,' Heinrich Schütz, *Matthaeus Passion* (Fragmenta), in Transcriptions from Machaut to J. S. Bach

Here Kurtág reveals, perhaps, the pedagogical roots of the duets, but again, what is being taught through this is not merely the musical gesture, but the sensitivity to the other musicians, not simply through sound, but beginning with the gesture of the performer themselves. Just as the *Játékok* appeared to reverse the normal order of events by beginning with the 'external' gesture, once again, it is the external gesture which is being controlled and exploited for didactic purposes in 'Die Jünger Jesu.' In one of these, 4b, the gesture of intimacy, the embrace, is both symbolically and literally present: the right hand of the *secundo* is higher, and therefore to the right of the right hand of the *primo*, while the *secundo*'s left hand is lowest and therefore to the left of the *primo*'s left hand. While other physical configurations are possible, the logical arrangement is for a small child to play the *primo*, sitting on the lap of the *secundo*, who thus literally embraces the child. This seems especially appropriate given Kurtág's earlier comments about the range a child is able to reach at the keyboard: the *primo* part in 4b is kept within an octave.

### "Eine Art Pantomime"

Until now the gestures I've been discussing have not been aimed at performance on the concert platform, but embody a kind of private theatre. The first overt use of the 'theatre of music' in Kurtág's works intended for professional public performance is to be found in *A kis csáva*, op. 15b, from 1978. In the Scherzo, movement III, there are a number of pause marks, where the players are instructed to become "suddenly motionless". Of course, this would be the normal response to a pause mark situated at a point at which the music is about to continue, but why does Kurtág need to specify the actual gesture of stillness itself? Here the music, which is to be 'in suspension' ac-

according to Kurtág's note, is embodied by the physical gestures of the players themselves; a line dividing the musical and the theatrical gesture has been crossed. The absence of movement in the caesurae implies that a degree of movement on the part of the players is required, as part of the piece. This is the start of a tendency which becomes more prominent in later pieces.<sup>11</sup>

As we have heard, the rehearsal process for the op. 17 pieces, which took place in the winter of 1980–81, involved Kurtág and Csengery working exclusively on the aural, rather than the visual aspect to the piece. Csengery is explicit in stating that Kurtág regarded the theatrical gesture as “forbidden” means. Everything was to be expressed through the voice alone. Rather than taking Kurtág's stated opposition to the theatrical gesture as valid for all of his pieces, and for all performers, it is possible to imagine Kurtág the teacher sensing that Csengery relied too much on the theatrical gesture in her performance generally, and seeking to suppress this tendency in her case only. Nevertheless, the theatre of music remains latent until the *Kafka Fragments*, op. 24, and it is worth speculating on the reason for its sudden, if measured, return in those pieces.

The interview with István Balázs took place on July 1st 1985, and barely five days afterwards Kurtág interrupted the composition of his still uncompleted piano concerto, in order to give masterclasses at the 1985 Bartók Seminar in Szombathely. Here he started to compose the first few settings of the *Kafka Fragments*.<sup>12</sup> The earliest dates given to the composition of any of the fragments is the 6th of July 1985, the date on which the Bartók Seminar at Szombathely began. This date is given to two of the fragments, the first section's No. 4, ‘Ruhelos,’ and No. 6, ‘Nimmermehr,’ although in both of these cases the dating is not decisive. ‘Ruhelos’ is dated “Szombathely, 1985. VII. 25 (VII. 6-ról),” suggesting that it was indeed begun provisionally, and then worked up properly at the later date; and ‘Nimmermehr’ is dated “1985. VII. 6 – VIII. 21,” again suggesting that these were the fragments that Kurtág began at the beginning of the Bartók Seminar. The first fragments of the *Kafka Fragments* may have been ‘forbidden fruit’ because he should have been working on the piano concerto, with which clearly he was having difficulties: the text fragment he dedicates to Kocsis reads in English “I will not let myself be made tired. I will dive into my story even if it

<sup>11</sup> Kunkel (1998) relates this gesture to one with exactly the same instruction in Ligeti's *Aventures*.

<sup>12</sup> Dibelius, p. 81.



should lacerate my face.”<sup>13</sup> But there may have been another sense in which the *Kafka Fragments* were ‘forbidden fruit:’ perhaps in response to the Csengery–Balázs interview, at which Csengery described the theatrical gesture as being “disallowed means,” Kurtág composed ‘Ruhelos,’ the fourth of the *Kafka Fragments*, and directs it to be played as “a kind of pantomime. The singer follows the acrobatics and the rage of the violinist with increasing tension, excitement, moreover fear, until her voice also fails in the end.”<sup>14</sup> The only aural contribution the singer makes is the final ‘breathed’ *ruhelos*. Thus whereas in the *Troussova* cycle Kurtág refused all theatrical gesture, requiring that everything should be expressed through the voice alone, here Kurtág allows *only* the theatrical gesture. The entire role of the singer, who it is clear from the dedication to the Csengery–Keller duo in ‘Nimmermehr,’ was always intended to be Adrienne Csengery, is in the realm of the theatrical. I haven’t been able to discover whether or not this was a direct response to the interview with István Balázs, although this is possible given Kurtág’s sensitivity to what is said about him in interviews.

Whether it is a direct reference or not, the *Kafka Fragments* mark a decisive shift in Kurtág’s thinking about theatre in music, and several more of the fragments have clear elements of music theatre in them. The use of the silent mouthing of the text on stage, which is taken to an extreme in ‘Ruhelos’ also appears in the 19th fragment, ‘Nichts dergleichen.’ Here the text of the title of the fragment is repeated obsessively “becoming more and more hoarse – more excited – until the voice fails at last. The lips move here faster and faster but without producing a sound.” In the 17th fragment, ‘Stolz (1910/15. November, Zehn Uhr),’ as well as in the eighth fragment, ‘Es zupfte mich jemand am Kleid,’ the same “erstarren” [freeze] instruction is given as in the *Scenes from a Novel*. In the latter example, the theatrical aspect is more prominent, because of the unorthodox way the violin is indicated to be played: like a guitar.

This new use of the theatre of music extends even beyond the gesture itself into the positions of the musicians on the concert platform. In fragment II/12, ‘Szene in der Elektrischen,’ the violinist is to use two violins, one with *scordatura* tuning. The composer calls for two stands, one for the music for the first violin, and one for the *scordatura* violin. The two stands are placed either side of the singer, so that when the violinist changes instrument, he is made to

<sup>13</sup> *Kafka Fragmente*, I/17 (score, p. 18).

<sup>14</sup> *Kafka Fragmente*, I/4 (score, p. 4).



walk around behind the singer. This is perhaps partly for pragmatic reasons: it may be better to have more space for the second instrument, so that the violinist does not get cluttered up. However, two small notes in the score suggest a symbolic reason for this visual gesture. The waltz in this ‘scene’ – itself perhaps a reference to his early years in Romania, both because of the waltz itself, which we know he associates with childhood, and the fact that the reference is written in Romanian to the 19th century Romanian composer Josif Ivanovici’s most famous work the *Danube Waves* – is also marked “Eusebius,” the observer of Schumann’s famous pair of psychological characters. The following *vivo* section, which is played on the ordinary, non-*scordatura* violin, is marked “Florestan,” the subjective, passionate side of the pair. Thus this number, with its direction to walk across the stage is a visual representation of the two characters in play in the fragment.

### Music and Presence

In many ways, the most significant development in Kurtág’s work during the 1990’s has been the exploration of musical space. I don’t wish to discuss this aspect of Kurtág’s work in detail on this occasion, partly because Richard Toop and Michael Kunkel have both published excellent accounts of this development.<sup>15</sup> But of the pieces for larger forces written in the late 1980’s and the 1990’s – the op. 27 ... *quasi una fantasia*... and the *Double Concerto*, *Samuel Beckett: What is the Word* op. 30b, *Stele* op. 33, and *Messages* op. 34 – and one should also include here *Grabstein für Stephan* op. 15c, revised in 1989 – all except *Stele* and *Messages* are written with the idea of distributing the forces around the room. Moreover, all have aspects of the ‘theatrical’ in the looser sense of the extravagant, over the top, such as the beginning of the ‘Recitativo’ in ...*quasi una fantasia*..., where brass and timpani announce a *cinematic tutti*, apparently without irony. And both the op. 30 pieces re-enact on the concert platform the real stuttering of the actress Ildikó Monyók caused by a near-fatal car accident, which prevented her from speaking. It is not until we get to the (as yet unpublished) ...*pas à pas – nulle part*... op. 36 that we get a repeat of the interaction of musicians on stage in the way it occurred in the *Kafka Fragments*. In this latter piece, the percussionist (in the 1999 Edinburgh Festival performance, the impish Mircea Ardeleanu) acts as court jester, subtly imitating and mocking the self-importance of the bari-

<sup>15</sup> In Beckles Willson – Williams (2001).

tone. It may be significant that the voice here is a baritone: all the works for solo voice since his op. 11 Pilinszky songs apart from the *Hölderlin: An...* are written for soprano, so that in ...*pas à pas – nulle part...* the percussionist can play a Leporello role to the baritone's Don Giovanni.

Nonetheless, a common factor between these not strictly 'theatrical' works and the elements of music theatre I've been discussing can, I think, be argued for, and it is connected with the second part of the title of my paper. 'Presence' is a term used in the philosophical discourse of ontology, and has played an important rôle in the development of post-structuralist thought.<sup>16</sup> However, music has remained largely aloof to these discussions, so it may seem an unfamiliar idea. Adorno in his 1954 article 'Das Altern der Neuen Musik,' accused contemporary composers of attempting to create a "new state of nature," in which their musical utterances would be identical with themselves only, and not refer to anything else. This drive that characterised modernism away from any form of reference generated an enormous quantity of new material, but was aimed at an ever-retreating goal: a 'pure' music which would not owe its existence to any other idea. The belief in a 'pure music,' without external reference – and that means without reference to other music, as well as to ideas or objects beyond music 'itself' – is a belief in music as *presence*, in ontological terms. As long as music is a sign, it is involved in a chain of reference, and is therefore not fully self-present. This is obvious, if one stops to think about it, but musicologists and – especially – music analysts tend to behave as if music *were* fully self-present, and it was partly this influence that created the drive towards the modernist goal of the 'pure music' in the first place. It's especially important that Kurtág's music is not treated as if it were a non-signifying object, since Kurtág himself is constantly reminding us of its ontological status as a network of (absent) reference, both to himself and to other composers, as well as to the outside world. There is a danger that the rejection of his early works could be seen as an attempt to create a *tabula rasa* on which to create truly individual, and in these terms, self-present artworks; but even from the start, there are elements of reference in the music. His rejection of the pre-Paris works is not in favour of a *musica pura*, but in favour of a music over whose referential qualities Kurtág has control.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For a clear and authoritative exposition of this idea and its application to music, see Monelle (1992), p. 306.

<sup>17</sup> See Williams, 'Kurtág, Modernity, Modernisms,' in Beckles Willson – Williams.

The use of the theatrical in music is an important way in which Kurtág reminds us of the music's ontological status as deferred presence, and marks an ever-growing awareness of this status on the part of the composer himself. Since the theatrical elements I've been describing show the performance of music itself to be at least a partly theatrical process, it must be recognised that the performers in Kurtág's theatre of music are themselves part of the process of signification: they are representing the idea of musical performance. Thus the music informs us that it is not itself fully present: its presence is, in the deconstructionists' sense, 'deferred.' This is a different situation from normal 'music theatre,' in which the music may signify, but is subservient to an imagined real presence, which is the narrative, or the emotional core of the music theatre piece. It may be his growing awareness of the impossibility of a truly 'original' – or 'originary' – music that to a certain extent freed Kurtág to make the kind of musical gesture which I described as 'theatrical' in a looser sense, since the nearly crippling self-criticism that has marked Kurtág's career has its origin in a powerful drive for originality. The realisation that a truly original – and therefore fully self-present – music is impossible, therefore, gives Kurtág the ability to adopt a number of masks with varying degrees of irony, even to the extent of adopting the mask of the dramatic orchestral *tutti*. I don't want to claim Kurtág then, as an example of a 'post-structuralist composer,' since all music involves a chain of reference which make it amenable to post-structuralist ideas, but I do want to claim Kurtág to be a composer who is aware of the failure of the idea of music as 'presence,' even if it is formulated in terms of his own music's being an endless process of reference. His use of the theatre of music is just one way in which he reveals this awareness.

## References

- BECKLES WILLSON, Rachel – WILLIAMS, Alan E., eds. (2001)  
*Perspectives on Kurtág: Contemporary Music Review* 20/2+3 (2001).
- BECKLES WILLSON, Rachel (2000)  
 'The Mind is a Free Creature: The Music of György Kurtág,' *Central Europe Review*, vol. 2 no. 12 (27th March 2000).
- DIBELIUS, Ulrich (1993)  
*Ligeti und Kurtág in Salzburg*, Programmbuch der Salzburger Festspiele, Salzburg/Zürich: Residenz Verlag.
- GRIFFITHS, Paul (1995)  
*Modern Music and After: Directions since 1945*, Oxford: OUP.

- HALÁSZ, Péter (1995)  
‘Kurtág Töredékek,’ *Holmi* 7/2, 154–183.
- KUNKEL, Michael (1998)  
*György Kurtág: “A kis csáva” (1978)*, Saarbrücken: Pfau-Verlag.
- KUNKEL, Michael (2001)  
‘folly for t(w)o: Samuel Beckett’s *What is the Word* and György Kurtág’s *Mi is a szó*’  
in Beckles Willson – Williams (2001).
- MONELLE, R. (1992)  
*Linguistics and Semiotics in Music*, Chur: Harwood Academic Press.
- SPANGEMACHER, Friedrich, ed. (1986)  
*György Kurtág*. Bonn: Boosey and Hawkes (Musik der Zeit 5).
- TOOP, Richard (2001)  
‘*Stele*: A Gravestone as End or Beginning? György Kurtág’s Long March Towards the Orchestra,’ in Beckles Willson – Williams (2001).
- WILLIAMS, Alan E. (2001)  
‘Kurtág, Modernity, Modernisms,’ in Beckles Willson – Williams (2001).