

## Recall and Repetition in Some Works by Kurtág\*

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Kurtág's musical language contains layers of memories. The result is a music filled with references to the musical past and present from medieval to contemporary to Hungarian folk music and with frequent self-references as well. The references to other composers are made obvious by the homages and dedications, and the titles and annotations placed in the score. The various recollections lead Kurtág to different musical manifestations: quoting works of other composers and his own; developing musical ideas or entire pieces from his mental store; extending a former work of his own by presenting each phrase in the original order and elaborating on each in turn. This paper will define categories of recall and then study the specific forms of recall used in Kurtág's instrumental music, especially the *String Quartet*, opus 28. The analysis will focus on the forms of recall as well as on the way in which Kurtág achieves continuity in a work that at first may appear to be a collage of quotes and references.

Kurtág admits to having been influenced by many composers of the past, ranging from Machaut and Palestrina to Bach, Schubert, Schumann, Bartók and Webern. In one of his interviews, Kurtág describes how, like most composers, he learned how to compose by imitating existing music. His first important composition, the *Viola Concerto*, was directly influenced by Bartók's *Violin Concerto*, and included outright quotations. Many of Kurtág's more recent works include the word 'homage' in their title. Since the homages are most often to composers, their music makes its way into Kurtág's own music, leading to more borrowing still. But here the references are usually not explicit. For example, many movements in *Játékok*, a collection of piano pieces written between 1975 and 1998, are written as homages

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to composers where the musical references consist of faint hints of these composers music. In the piece ‘Bells – Hommage à Stravinsky,’ a series of chords is reminiscent of the bells at the end of Stravinsky’s *Les Noces*. In ‘Hommage à Domenico Scarlatti,’ Kurtág alludes to Scarlatti’s virtuosic keyboard writing as well as to his melodies. In *Hommage à Robert Schumann*, opus 15d, there are hints of Schumann’s *Kreisleriana*, in the first and third movements. In the last movement of the same piece, sub-titled ‘Maestro Raro découvre Guillaume de Machaut,’ an allusion to Machaut’s music is created through the isorhythmic structure of the movement.

Many other pieces by Kurtág echo earlier pieces of his own. He has said that when he writes a musical passage that he is happy with, he accepts it as a gift, incorporates it into his language as one of his musical objects and feels free to distribute it throughout his works. Just as a cadential formula is generic and freely reused by any composer, Kurtág’s musical objects are freely reused from one composition to the next. One example of this is Kurtág’s frequent re-setting of the “Flowers we are, Frail Flowers” motto, first heard in *The sayings of Péter Bornemisza*. Three examples of this motto are re-composed in the *String Quartet*, opus 28.

I define two large categories (each containing sub-categories) for the different forms of recall practised by Kurtág, but the categories are not mutually exclusive; one composition may use all categories at once, as in the case of the opus 28. A list of these categories is found in *Figure 1*:

<b>A: Borrowing from other composers</b>	
A1:	transcribing entire movements
A2:	borrowing a motive or a musical gesture
A3:	using a composer’s characteristic compositional technique or instrumentation
<b>B: Self-reference</b>	
B1:	quoting entire movements
B2:	using a previously written movement for the basis of a new movement
B3:	re-working a similar compositional ‘problem

*Figure 1*: List of categories of recall

The two large categories are listed as: (A) borrowing from other composers’ works and (B) self-reference. Within category A, three kinds of borrowing are identified.

1. Category A1: transcribing entire movements. Here, the String Quartet, opus 28, is, as far as I know, the only example. Two of the fifteen movements quote movements from two separate composers.

2. Category A2: borrowing a motive or a musical gesture from a composer, as an homage, a dedication, or an *in memoriam*. Here, the list of examples is extensive. In the *Játékok* piano collection alone, there are many examples of homages to a very diverse collection of composers: from Christian Wolff to Domenico Scarlatti, from Edgard Varèse to Schubert, from Stockhausen to J. S. Bach, and the list goes on. I have not been able to discern a consistent pattern in the way that the music of the different composers makes its way into Kurtág's music. The sense is that some musical memory emerges from his mental store and is then translated into Kurtág's microcosmic and fragmented language. In order for this category not to overlap with the next, only those compositions that are identified by the composer as being homages or *in memoriams* by a title or a note in the score, will be included.

3. Category A3: using a composer's characteristic compositional technique or instrumentation in his own works. An example that falls into this category is taken once again from the String Quartet, opus 28. Although only one of the movements in this piece quotes Webern's opus 31 directly, four other movements use certain aspects of Webern's piece as their starting point. Movement IV uses three of Webern's row forms as the basis of its pitch content. Movement V is a Fantasy based on the verticalities found in Webern's movement. Movement VI translates Webern's double canon technique into Kurtág's own microcosmic music world. Movement VII preserves one of the voice pairs of Webern's double canon, while the other voice pair is left free.

Within category B, three kinds of self-reference are identified as well.

1. Category B1: quoting entire movements, often transcribed for other instruments. Some examples are found in *Rückblick*, written in 1993, a collection of forty-six movements that combines old and new pieces into a sixty minute program. The old movements date as far back as the opus 3 from 1960. Some are left untouched. This is the case with many movements from *Játékok* and several sections from the *Bornemisza-sayings*. Others are simply transcribed for trumpet, double bass and keyboards.

2. Category B2: using a previously written movement as the basis for a new movement. One example is the last movement of *quasi una fantasia*.

Here, each phrase of the fifth movement of *Twelve Microludes for String Quartet*, opus 13, is presented and elaborated on in turn. Another example is the final movement of the symphonic work, *Stele*, opus 33 (1994). Here, the previously written model is taken from volume VI of the *Játékok* series. In the choral-like movement for piano, the chords move slowly in whole notes. The orchestrated version translates this whole note pulse into a more ornate, persistent rhythmic figure. Also, some of the chords have been altered, betraying Kurtág's attempt at solving old compositional problems in new ways in the process of re-working the old piece. The almost obsessive re-use of the 'Flowers we are' motto and its constant transformation is another example that fits into this category, since we are talking about re-composing the same motto over and over again. In the *Bornemisza-sayings* itself, the motto is repeated three times, once simply transposed and once already transformed. This motto takes on numerous transformations in other works such as the *Játékok* collection and the opus 14. Initially, the motto consisted (in terms of pitch structure) of two consecutive tetrachords, each containing two major thirds separated by a semitone. Since then, the transformations have included versions that simply spell out the diatonic or the chromatic scale or versions based on chains of fifths. Although many of the versions are very different from each other, the idea of an axis of symmetry remains a constant theme.

3. Category B3: re-working a similar compositional 'problem' from one work to the next. Kurtág has said that as a composer, he "comes back to an identical problem and tries to solve it in different ways. Of course, this leads to repetition." Some of the titles of the pieces in the *Játékok* collection summarise the compositional practice at hand. For example, the sub-title to 'Dialog for the 70th birthday of András Mihály' in volume V reads "or: how can one answer to the same 4 sounds with only 3". This problem then becomes the subject of experiment in the movement. In some cases, several movements may have the same descriptive title. For example, four movements in the first three books of *Játékok* are entitled 'Playing with overtones' and each address the 'problem' described in the title in their own way.

The *String Quartet*, opus 28, exemplifies all categories of recall at once and as such, is a perfect example of Kurtág's practice. The quartet was written as a tribute to Endre Szervánszky, a Hungarian composer who died in 1977. Part of Szervánszky's movement, a tonal *Serenade*, is quoted literally as the finale of the entire quartet. Late in his life, Szervánszky became very interested in the music of Webern. A note on the score reads:

Endre Szervánszky discovered for himself the music of Anton Webern relatively late, but then it became the most decisive experience of the last twenty years of his life. This explains why an homage to Webern had to be included in a work composed *in memoriam* Szervánszky as well.

Kurtág incorporates an arrangement for string quartet of the four-part canon from Webern's *Second Cantata*, preceded by movements in which Webern's music is freely recomposed. So far, the uses of recall display those of category A. There are also numerous self-references involved. For example, movements III and XII are both transcriptions for string quartet of the two pieces in the *Játékok* piano collection which Kurtág called 'Homage à Szervánszky'. Other movements in the quartet are transcriptions of earlier pieces by Kurtág as well. Pre-existing pieces find new meaning in the larger context of the quartet.

Kurtág has referred to the quartet as a 'Requiem,' and accordingly one of the forces that binds the fifteen short movements together is the subject of death. First of all, the quartet was written *in memoriam* Endre Szervánszky. Movements I, VIII and XIII are elaborations of the 'Flowers we are' motto, which is itself a contemplation on the fragility of life. Movement I was also written in memory of one of Kurtág's students, Tibor Turcsányi, who died in a car crash. The second movement was written in memory of another student, Zsolt Baranyai, who died in the same accident. The eighth movement was written *in memoriam* Gabriella Garzó and finally, the eleventh movement was written *in memoriam* György Szoltsányi. All of these pieces were originally written at various different times for different instruments and seemingly had nothing to do with each other except for the fact that they all grieve someone's death. It was only after the idea of a 'Requiem' in the memory of Szervánszky was conceived that Kurtág chose to give these existing pieces new meaning in the larger context of a fifteen-movement String Quartet. The act of gathering and piecing together pre-existing material of his own and of two other composers to create a unified work has its parallels in literature. Thomas Mann, in his *The Story of a Novel*, describes how, in writing *Doctor Faustus*, he assimilated material from innumerable sources, including direct quotes from Schindler's biography, personal life experience, literary and musical sources, and after appropriating them and setting them all on the same level, created his own fictitious story. Another literary parallel can be found in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. Bits and pieces from innumerable sources are gathered and incorporated into the novel, giv-

ing each fragment new meaning. It is interesting that both of these authors have been referred to by Kurtág and others in accounts of his own music.

*Figure 2* identifies the form of recall being used in each movement of the quartet as well as the category to which it belongs:<sup>1</sup>

Movements	Categories of Recall used in the movements of opus 28					
	A1	A2	A3	B1	B2	B3
1				x	x	
2				x		
3		x		x		
4			x			
5			x			
6			x			
7			x			
8				x	x	
9					x	
10	x					
11				x		
12		x		x		
13					x	
14			x			
15	x					

*Figure 2:* Categories of recall used in the movements of opus 28

The first movement is both an elaboration of Kurtág's 'Flowers we are' motto and a piece written independently, in memory of Tibor Turcsányi. In terms of recall then, it fits into two categories, B1 and B2.

The second movement was originally scored for harp and two recorders in memory of Zsolt Baranyai. I identify this movement as belonging to category B1.

The third movement was written before the opus 28 was even conceived as well. It was originally written as 'Hommage à Szervánszky' in book III of *Játékok*, and is transcribed here for string quartet. One of the forms of recall involved here then, is B1 once again. There is another form of recall involved since the homage takes the form of re-composing the opening of Szervánszky's *Serenade for strings*. This form of recall falls into category A2. Kurtág has called this movement "quasi skeletal," referring to his translation of Szervánszky's piece into his own microcosmic language.

The remaining movements fall into the categories as follows:

<sup>1</sup> The only category not included in Figure 2 is B3 (re-working a similar compositional "problem"). This does not mean that B3 is not involved in the piece. In this case, however, it is hard to pinpoint the specific piece that is being alluded to without a title or a note in the score.

Movement four is divided into three parts, each of which highlights one of the forms of the row used in Webern's *Second Cantata*. This places it in category A3.

The fifth movement, a fantasy on the harmonies found in Webern's cantata, belongs once again to category A3.

In movement six, Kurtág does not borrow any specific pitch material from Webern's cantata such as row forms or harmonies. Instead, he borrows Webern's double canon technique and translates it into his own personal language. This movement belongs to category A3 as well.

The seventh movement reduces Webern's double canon to a simple two-voice canon. The other two voices are left free to accompany the canonic voice pair. This is the fourth movement in a row that belongs to A3.

In movement eight, we find yet another example of an elaboration of the 'Flowers we are, Frail Flowers' motto. This version of the motto is dedicated to the memory of another friend who passed away, Gabriella Garzó. According to Peter Hoffman, in his article 'Post-Weberian Music?', Kurtág originally wrote the piece in a piano booklet for his wife. The movement is based on five tones and these are translations of a telephone number into pitches in the diatonic scale. This telephone number was told to Kurtág in a message about the death of his friend. In terms of recall, this movement belongs to the same categories as movement I, namely B1 and B2.

The ninth movement translates the diatonic seventh movement from *Microludes for String Quartet* into a chromatic universe, with some microtonal embellishments. This movement belongs again to B2.

Movement ten is a rare example of a work by Kurtág that belongs to category A1: The straightforward transcription of the vocal final movement of Webern's cantata.

Movement eleven is an arrangement of a piano piece originally written for Gy. Szoltsányi, within the *Játékok* series. Since it is a simple arrangement with no attempt at re-composition, this movement belongs to category B1.

Like movement three, movement twelve was originally conceived as one of the two pieces in *Játékok*, book III, entitled 'Hommage à Szervánszky.' Just like movement three then, movement twelve belongs to both categories A1 and B2.

Movement thirteen is the third example of an elaboration of the 'Flowers we are, Frail Flowers' motto. Like movements I and VIII, it belongs to category B2 but this time there is no inscription in the score dedicat-



ing it to a dead friend. As far as I know, this is not a transcription of a previously written movement; at least I have not read or seen any evidence of this.

Movement fourteen is seemingly 'free' but very reminiscent of Bartók's *String Quartet 4*, first movement. In terms of recall then, this movement belongs to category A3.

The final movement XV belongs to category A1, just as movement X did, since it consists of a straightforward transcription of the opening of the *Serenade for String Orchestra* by Szervánszky.

The next step in my analysis is to understand Kurtág's process of piecing together the individual and seemingly unrelated movements. We quickly learn that this process was carefully planned and that the movements are actually closely related to one another, with many motivic threads and thematic links running through the entire piece. I have grouped the fifteen movements into seven sections (*Figure 3*):

Movement	Section Name
1 2 3	X'
4 5 6 7	Y'
8 9	X''
10	Y
11 12 13	X'''
14	X + Y or Z?
15	X

*Figure 3*: Formal structure of movement

Each section is either a form of X or a form of Y, X being the Szervánszky movement and Y Webern's double canon movement. Since these two pillar movements are heard towards the end of the piece instead of at the opening, the result is a kind of reversed theme and variations. There are many cases where the movements allude to both pillars but their label was chosen because the allusions to the one are more overt. Kurtág has managed



to bridge the gap between the two contrasting musical worlds of Webern and Szervánszky by transcribing them for string quartet and transposing the *Serenade* to C major and the prime form of the row of the canon to begin on C. In this way, he has created a central common pitch. Many of the other movements revolve around C as well. Kurtág also brings them together by highlighting some elements that are common to both movements such as the major third and the open fifth sonorities.

The first three movements, labelled together as X', each present a characteristic musical element from the *Serenade*. Movement I presents the open fifths, movement II the C major chord, and movement III, a characteristic sighing motive. The three movements together sound very much like an independent section of the work. The first movement moves directly into the second with no breaks and movements II and III both begin with the same interval, namely interval class 3. The dynamic level remains in the *piano* range and C, the lowest bass note for the three movements, functions as a pedal. The third movement is an example of a movement that alludes to both the Szervánszky and the Webern simultaneously. Just as the Webern, it is partly palindromic.

Movements IV, V, VI and VII are then grouped together into section Y'. Movement IV is based on three forms of Webern's row, all used in the canon. Kurtág highlights the symmetry inherent in the row and the abundance of interval class 4. The fifth movement is a homophonic translation of the canon and as such, introduces all the vertical sonorities of movement X. When we hear them later in the context of the double canon, they already sound familiar. Movement VI then introduces the texture of a double canon and it is almost as if movements V and VI together, summarised the contents of Webern's piece. The double canon is then simplified into a simple canon in movement VII, again anticipating and preparing us for movement X.

Section X'' consists of movements VIII and IX. The feeling of a return to the opening material is very strong. The eighth movement is very similar to the version of the 'Flowers we are' motto we found in movement I. This time however, chromatic neighbour notes embellish the underlying diatonic structure, summarising the contrast between the pillar movements. Movement IX brings us back to the high register and spirit of the second movement but in a chromatic setting this time. Unlike the opening section however, instead of hovering around C, the notes G, B and D are strongly emphasised: Movement VIII ends with a B minor chord, rendered imperfect by a Bb chromatic

matic neighbour, and movement IX moves chromatically from G to D. This tonal allusion is not surprising in a work that pays homage to a composer by quoting the tonal opening of one of his works.

X''' follows the Webern transcription. Movements XII and XIII correspond to movements III and I respectively. Movement XII consists of an exact repetition of the duet from movement III with an added free voice pair, bringing us back to the opening material in a very concrete way. Movement XIII, is a variation on the 'Flowers we are' motto we found in movement I. This time, the motto alludes to Webern in its use of a double canon. Movement XI does not have a corresponding partner but the material is linked to the second movement in the sense that it strongly emphasises C. In fact, C is repeated 96 times. The eleventh movement also alludes to Webern's prime row form. Just as the pitch class C functions as an axis of symmetry in Webern's row, here, it functions as an axis of symmetry for the entire movement, opening up in both directions towards G and folding back in towards C.

Movement XIV is set apart from the rest of the work. Although it does allude to the Webern and the Szervánszky in some ways, the allusion to Bartók is also strong, particularly to the opening of Bartók's *Fourth String Quartet*. In terms of section names, it could be called section Z, but this is left open for now. There are some aspects that do tie this movement to the rest of the work: like the Webern, it is a double canon; interval class 5 plays an important role, as it does in the structure of the row and in the open fifth sonority heard in the cello part of the *Serenade*.

The first section of this paper showed how Kurtág's extensive use of recall may be organised into different categories. I then tried to show briefly how a work like the opus 28, which incorporates all of the categories, is shaped into a unified whole. The analysis is by no means complete; I have pointed out only a few of the aspects that connect the movements to one another. Others are touched on by Ben Frandzel and still many more exist. This paper, a work in progress, will be incorporated into one of the chapters of my dissertation on Kurtág's music. The chapter will focus on Kurtág's use of recall and will include a historical discussion on the use of recall in music in general.

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