

# Beckett after Kurtág: Towards a Theory of Theatricality of a Non-theatrical Music

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Since the late Hölderlin-songs, the musical fragments from G. C. Lichtenberg's 'Sudelbüchern' up to the 'poems after Beckett', composer György Kurtág has been interested in songs for one voice. The omission of the vertical is chosen less due to the idealization of the melody for one voice, as demanded by Jean-Jacques Rousseau for 'l'unité de la mélodie' in contrast to the complexity of the movement for several voices, but due to Samuel Beckett's reduction of language and the theatrical scene. From the *Pièces sans paroles* to *Words and music* and *Cascando* to Beckett's last plays, amongst them *What is the word*, a program of reduction of language and scene is inscribed in those texts.

The reason for this is not the demonstration of speechlessness and the loss of communication of individuals in post-industrial society, but the emancipation of a-semantic aspects of phonetics and gestures of spoken language with regard to the semantics of the texts and to recall them into cultural memory. In this aspect, Kurtág's vocal oeuvre is connected to linguistic criticism, which allows language only as one definite sign for information and ignores all other articulatory and pre- and meta-linguistic aspects of language. These forms of linguistic criticism have been pronounced by two fundamental lines in the 20th century: in Artaud's criticism of the theatre of the texts, which he confronts with the *Théâtre de la cruauté*, a theatre of direct affects and body-gestures, and in the phonetic composition as realized by Kurt Schwitters in the area of language and by Luciano Berio und György Ligeti (cf. *Artikulation* and *Glissandi* and their effect on *Aventures / Nouvelles Aventures*) in electronical music.

At first Kurtág's songs for one voice can be seen as a third stadium, which frees tonal, gestural, and rhythmic aspects of articulated and sung lan-

guage by keeping the discursive character of language and not by phonetic dissociation and pulverisation. It would be possible not to divide his songs for one voice and his instrumental pieces for several voices in general, but to suspect a unity of horizontal and vertical representation according to Schönberg's and Webern's thoughts about music. It is this connection, which I will discuss in the following comparison of the musical scene *What is the word* and the *Poems after Beckett*. Due to the fact that one of these *Poems*, the Berceuse 'morte parmi ses mouches mortes,' is dedicated to Heinz Holliger, it is only natural that I will conclude by taking up the music-theatrical transformation of Beckett's texts by Holliger and Morton Feldman. Because of the limited time I will concentrate mainly on Kurtág. I will now develop and discuss three central aspects: 1. Beckett's text *What is the word*; 2. The merging of the song for one voice from op. 30a into the instrumental piece for several voices of op. 30b; 3. Imaginary theatre in op. 30b – the concept of theatricality of non-theatrical music.

### 1. Beckett's text *What is the word*

The text consists of 53 lines, which are arranged like verses. It continuously stammers new words and starts anew to secure the said. From line 4 on the text keeps circling around the question 'What is the word.' Without finding an answer, the text closes with this pressing recurring question. In the end, the question turns into a comment: it is the assertion that there is no finite answer to the question, only absolute openness. Therefore, the text does not end at this point, but simply stops without punctuation mark in accordance with the ideas of Schönberg, who differentiated between the open stop as demonstrated in the third piano piece from op. 11 and closing. But for the double parentheses, the hyphens, which merge through the blackened word and the language into the Mallarméic white of the paper into wordless 'silence,' Beckett's entire text remains without punctuation. In its lack of punctuation marks, the text resembles Molly Bloom's parting-monologue in *Ulysses*. This text, as well as the famous Siren-chapter, which Luciano Berio put to music in his *Omaggio a Joyce*, bear resemblance to Beckett's text in certain aspects: the association of words through a change of coloration of intonation and assonance and the rhythmic movement in articulation. Furthermore, the additive-iterative linguistic process reminds of Schwitters' *Ur-Sonate*.

1	folly —	närrisch (verrückt) —
2	folly for to —	närrisch um zu —
3	for to —	um zu —
4	what is the word —	was ist das wort —
5	folly from this —	närrisch von diesem —
6	all this —	all' dies —
7	folly from all this —	närrisch von all' diesem —
8	given —	gegeben (wie ich höre) —
9	folly given all this	närrisch gegeben all' diesem —
10	seeing —	sehen (sehend) —
11	folly seeing all this —	verrückt all' dies zu sehen —
12	this —	dies —
13	what is the word —	was ist das wort —
14	this this —	dies dies —
15	this this here —	dies dies hier —
16	all this this here —	all' dies dies hier —
17	folly given all this —	närrisch gegeben all' diesem —
18	seeing —	sehend —
19	folly seeing all this this here —	närrisch sehend all' dies hier —
20	for to —	um zu —
21	what is the word —	was ist das wort —
22	see —	sehen (verstehen) —
23	glimpse —	flüchtiger Blick (Schimmern) —
24	seem to glimpse —	scheinbar zu schimmern —
25	need to seem to glimpse —	nötig scheinbar zu schimmern —
26	folly for to need to seem to glimpse —	närrisch es nötig zu haben zu schimmern —
27	what —	was —
28	what is the word —	was ist das wort —
29	and where —	und wo —
30	folly for to need to seem to glimpse what were —	närrisch es nötig zu haben, daß etwas wo schimmert —
31	where —	wo —
32	what is the word —	was ist das wort —
33	there —	dort —
34	over there —	darüber hinaus (über das dort) —

35	away over there—	fern vom darüber hinaus—
36	afar—	fern—
37	afar awayover there—	fern, nicht weit weg von dort hinten —
38	afaint—	nicht schwach, nicht matt (a-faint?)—
39	afaint afar away over there what —	nicht schwach, aber doch fern, weit weg von dort hinten
40	what—	was—
41	what is the word —	was ist das wort—
42	seeing all this—	sehend all' dies—
43	all this this—	all' dies dies—
44	all this this here—	all' dies dies hier—
45	folly for to see what—	närrisch dazu um etwas zu sehen
46	glimpse—	schimmern—
47	seem to glimpse—	scheint zu schimmern—
48	need to seem to glimpse—	nötig scheint es zu schimmern—
49	afaint afar away over there what —	nicht zu schwach von fern doch fern über diesem was—
50	folly for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar away over there what—	närrisch für die Notwendigkeit um scheinbar zu schimmern nicht matt aber fern und doch fern über diesem was—
51	what—	was—
52	what is the word—	was ist das wort—
53	what is the word—	was ist das wort—

Like Schwitters and Joyce Beckett produces rhythmically stretched lines, as if the extension and stretching of language would provide any security concerning the uttered, which immediately collapses with the following ‘what’ and sinks into bottomless nothingness. Joyce produces these extensions by using Portamento-words, which were known to Beckett as the translator of the *Anna Livia-Plurabelle*-chapter into French. Schwitters generates them by making use of Beethoven’s thematic-motif procedure, which he employed for the structuring of the sound-text of the *Ur-Sonate*. – Beckett’s text has a lot in common with the lengthening of rhythmic time composed by Schwitters and Joyce. Keeping the formal and semantic units of a word or of a line while reading aloud, one line from the single word ‘what’ or ‘given’ and ‘see’ extends past several words, which lead, true to the principle of addition and permutation, to ever more extended lines (“folly for to need to seem to glimpse what were”), up to the one all-embracing and incredibly lengthened long-line (“folly for to need to seem to

glimpse afaint afar away over there what”). Following this line, the text collapses over the ‘unanswered question.’ Trying to perform the dynamics between the short and long lines in a ‘close and musical reading,’ processes of acceleration and retardation result from the arrangement of the lines if every line is spoken in one breath. As a result, the articulation reaches from simple, calm speaking, to the stronger accentuated scansion of single words, up to the breathless staccato, which merely renders the driving excitement of phonemes and consonants audible, no longer elliptically structured syntax and meaningful speech.

Even though this Beckett-text, like Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, is almost notated like a musical score, and therefore can be performed according to the rubati and accelerandi, its language is centred directly around the word and its shades. The centre of an indefinite word is not only circled as missing, but the sound-shadow, which is cast by one word onto another, is concentrated metaphorically on the sense of sight, on the sense, which mediates the contemplation of objects and the reading of script. It is ‘seeing,’ which is connected to ‘seem’ and by that with ‘to glimpse.’ Hereby seeming is described as lighting up and as illusion and therefore describing the far aura-like shimmer. In this process the questioned recognition of what the word is, the designation of the names of an object, includes the double meaning, which is called recognition in Greek: having seen the real as well as the seeming in one instance. That, which is the word, cannot be determined firmly, because seeing does not provide security regarding the perceived. It can be truth and illusion at the same time. The movement in Beckett’s text *What is the word* is governed by this insecurity: it does not only include the reflection, but also the gestures and the pace of speech. Trying to read Beckett’s text against this double background explains György Kurtág’s way of dealing with it.

## **2. The merging of the song for one voice from op. 30a into the instrumental piece for several voices of op. 30b**

In an interview György Kurtág<sup>1</sup> stated, that no meaning should be forced onto the sound material from the outside or by the author, that the single sound must grow from the non-sound, from the not-yet-sounding; furthermore, he emphasised the importance of plainchant: the free and simple line, which takes an endless and yet definite form at the same time due to the ac-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Kurtág-Portrait, ZDF/Arte 1996.

cents of prosody and small and yet breaking changes. – This transfer from one to several lines is the decisive program between the version op. 30a for vocal part and largely piano in unison and the chamber-musical-scenic version of op. 30b. First it is the piercing intensity of Ildikó Monyók's singing voice, for whom Kurtág composed op. 30a. Beckett's text *What is the word* seemed to be tailor-made for her, to quote from Thomas Laqueur's<sup>2</sup> famous book title *Écrit sur le corps*. Ildikó Monyók, a famous rock-singer and actress lost her voice in a tragic stage accident. Beckett's text and Kurtág's musical transformation seemed to be perfect to help her regain speech from the impossibility of any articulation on a different level.

Beckett's recovery of language and Kurtág's personal language recovery leave their mark in the composition in two ways. We know that Beckett wrote *What is the word* after he had had a stroke, which deprived him of articulation and of the knowledge of words. Therefore, this text is about the possibility to recover language in a very basic way. For Beckett, this necessitated remembering the language of childhood and the first acquisition of language. '[F]olly,' the silly hustle and bustle of children and old people, alludes to that (if we may leave the carnival of Basel out of account). This connection is also emphasised by traditional Beckett scholarship (in his beautiful, recently published article on Kurtág's *What is the word* Thomas Steiert<sup>3</sup> pointed this out): 'folly' is associated with the proper name 'Fowley's Folly,' which is referred to the 'ruins of a tower in the vicinity of Coodrinagh,' from where Beckett could see Wales during his childhood in the vicinity of Dublin.

Beckett's mentioned childhood and his recovered speech offer a connection to Kurtág's biography. Kurtág testifies to the fact that he suffers from dyslexia and that he tends to incorporate his autobiography in his compositional processes (this is also true for his *Kafka-Fragmente*<sup>4</sup>). This personal background interwoven with Beckett's return to language explains the incredible intensity with which each word is dragged from a distant past, from an empty space of consciousness with difficulty and crosses the lips in a stutter. Therefore Beckett's text and Kurtág's composition not only form a document, which is in between two texts. It is a documentation of the pro-

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *Écrit sur le corps*, German: *Auf den Leib geschrieben*, Frankfurt am Main 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Steiert, 'György Kurtág's Vertonung von Samuel Becketts "What is the word"...', in eds., Klaus Kiefer et alii, *Das Gedichtete behauptet sein Recht. Festschrift für Walter Gebhard*, Frankfurt am Main 2001, p. 584 (Europäische Hochschulschriften).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Martin Zenck, 'Inszenierung von Authentizität in den Kafka-Fragmenten von György Kurtág nebst einem Prologomenon zu einer Theorie der Authentizität im musikalischen Kunstwerk,' in eds., Fischer-Lichte et alii, *Theatralität* vol. I, Tübingen–Basel 2000, pp. 129–149.

cess, which precedes articulated and musically transformed language, and possibly even leads to linguistic expression. This process is valid within the resulting and seemingly securely recovered language. The blanks, stops, and ellipses within the text, the parentheses, fermatas, and pauses in the music cannot be seen as breaks in the text, which is not discursive anyway. Rather, they serve to mediate imaginary language. The single words and sounds are either brought to fulfilment in silent pauses or they are connected impulsively to the following words and sounds over the pauses, as in the works of Anton Webern.<sup>5</sup>

Maybe the piercing intensity of each syllable and each sound during the rehearsals for the singing part with Kurtág's piano accompaniment, which probably does not really serve as a support for the intonation, but especially as a deepening and colouring of each sound, is a result of these pauses. Herein, the transition to op. 30b is already hinted. The vocal part colours with every breathed, sung, stuttered, yelled, lengthened, and spoken phoneme the intonation of the piano in a specific way, whereas the piano outlines this phoneme more precisely in its own way. These reciprocally changing processes of influence, which can be understood as interactive relationships between all parts, vocal as well as instrumental, can be applied to the entire ensemble, which is spread out over the stage area.

Correspondingly, Michael Kunkel has set out this connection with a comparison of the fair copy of op. 30a and the particell-entries found there in his enlightening article on Kurtág's reading of Beckett.<sup>6</sup> This connection was changed fundamentally later, well beyond the details for the instrumentation, into a network of all parts within the real and imaginary stage area, which is spread out like a fan.

Even though all forms and attitudes of articulation for a vocal part, all nuances of speaking, scansion, singing, stuttering, and screaming, are already contained in this simple version, decidedly different aspects emerge in the revised and new version of op. 30b. The recorded piano-rehearsals<sup>7</sup> with Kurtág on the piano and the singer Ildikó Monyók, as well as the sketches concerning this work on display at the Paul Sacher Stiftung illustrate the

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Martin Zenck – Gerhard Buhr, 'Georg Trakls Gedicht "Nachts" und die Kompositionen dieses Gedichts von Anton Webern, Theodor W. Adorno und Heinz Holliger: Versuch einer literatur- und musikwissenschaftlichen Doppelinterpretation,' in eds., Klaus, Kiefer et alii, *Das Gedichtete behauptet sein Recht. Festschrift für Walter Gebhard*, Frankfurt am Main 2001, pp. 544ff.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Michael Kunkel, "'Das Artikulierte geht verloren.'" Eine Beckett-Lektüre von György Kurtág,' in *Mitteilungen der Paul Sacher Stiftung*, Nr. 13, April 2000, pp. 39ff.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Kurtág-Portrait* (mentioned in footnote 1).



transformation of op. 30a into op. 30b. Already in the version for piano, the composer had filled in the instrumentation as in a *particell*-movement.

The decisive steps, though, especially concerning the colouring on added vocal and instrumental parts and the new *dia-linear* concept show a completely different work. In doing this, Kurtág reproduced Beckett's text formally. Beckett's text can be seen in the tension between the linear orientation of the horizontal of each single line, the diagonal orientation of the long-lines (this *dia-linear* aspect is depicted by a line drawn with a ruler from the very first word down to the growing long-lines) and the vertical arrangement of the single verses. This geometrical relationship between the lines is mirrored in the score between the parts. Either the articulation of the reciting alto-voice is isolated and oriented linear-discursive, or the other voices come in succession, imitating each other, fanning out the text *What is the word* in a diagonal. Eventually there is the simultaneous colouring and pollution directly in between the alto-voice and the instrumental parts.

The starting point for the poly-perspective colouring of a ringing linguistic sound in all voices and instruments lies in the different way of pronunciation of a word: calm, very slowly, fast, escaping; with a lot of breath, with a lot of voice and singsong referring to dialect. The easier and more elementary the text, the more possibilities it provides to differentiate the articulation, the utterance of sounds and language. Kurtág stated that one single sound would be enough – as for Scelsi and yet differently – to compose. As well one single word could suffice to say what it is and what it can, by pronouncing it in different ways: in combination with different linguistic gestures, which are mediated through physical expression, different poses and attitudes; decisive, lachrymose, desperate, ironic, cheeky and giggling, angry, aggressive. Without the facial expressions and gestures of the body being immediately effective – almost in mime – both emerge only from the mode of articulation, from the shaping of mouth and lips. This is how the expression of each word is determined, not by semantics. These modes of articulation refer to the only Hungarian singing and speaking alto-voice, to the English declaiming solo-filled choir-voices and the instruments that imitate the oral practices of the singing voices. From these proceedings connections develop in the horizontal as well as in the vertical. A sound acts on the following, finding its widely spread confirming or revolting echo.

It is the principle of phonemes taking colour, changing colour, and colour coming off horizontally and vertically, which are always traced back to



the single word no matter all dissociation and are not isolated radically and un-semanticised as in phonetic poetry and phonetic composition. In the way of the transformed linguistic sounds, the Hungarian text is moved into the English, even though those languages remain otherwise separated as completely different systems of meaning and sound. All voices and instruments are included in this process of sound-transformation so that it can be said that every single sound is fanned up vertically as often as a single phoneme. The result is a multiple unison with different timbres, which can change in such a way that the single sound is extended to a heterophony. In this aspect, Kurtág's op. 30b is an incredibly simple and concentrated piece, which sounds into the hollow space where the silence of semantics merges into the sound-gesture of language. Maybe this is an answer to what the word is. That it is important how it is being uttered in an infinite number with minimal changes and not what it is and what it means.

### 3. Imaginary theatre in op. 30b – the concept of theatricality of non-theatrical music

In his famous *Dictionnaire de musique*<sup>8</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau distinguished scene and monologue. Hereby the dialogic discourse on stage seemed to be decided clearly. Rousseau would have denied any scenic character to the singular and isolated monologue, as well as to the inner monologue. Kurtág's encoded title *Samuel Beckett is sending a message through Ildikó Monyók in the rendering of István Siklós* is positioned in between the genres of a theatrical and non-theatrical art, seen under the aspect of Rousseau's distinction. Opus 30a as an inner monologue is definitely no scenic work; op. 30b is neither nor, because the reactions in the other voices part from the monologue of the monody and return to it. Nevertheless this distinction is much too undifferentiated in order to stand up to the score and staging of op. 30b. For once, the other voices react to the monologue, but they gain independence opposed to the sung Hungarian monody by reciting, singing, whispering, and shouting Beckett's text in English. In this they even free themselves, partly ironically, from the monosyllabism of the reciting alto-voice, which is in search of language. Moreover the final part, which is

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Art. 'Scène,' in *Dictionnaire de musique* (1764); quoted in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Musik und Sprache. Ausgewählte Schriften. Mit einem Essay von Peter Gülke oder von der Zuständigkeit des Dilettanten*, Leipzig 1989, p. 316. Naturally it should be mentioned that Rousseau would not have accepted the isolated, but the monologue integrated in the dramaturgy of the theatre as scenic category, where it is positioned functionally within a discursive context with the dialogues and the ensemble-scenes.

called a 'scenic epilogue,' and the originally planned scenic prologue to the introducing 'Sinfonia,' as well as the special arrangement of all singers and instrumentalists and the conductor prescribe an almost scenic disposition of the piece. It would be unsuccessful to simply stage it. It would also be inappropriate to produce it as a statuary oratory. The scenic latency as well as the scenic presence of Kurtág's pieces shows in the production of *Pierrot Lunaire*, the *Messages of the late R. V. Troussova*, which Christoph Marthaler put in scene brilliantly in Basel, and the *Kafka-Fragmente* produced by the Tübinger Figuren-Theater. It seems – and this is my preliminary conclusion – in chamber music since the 1960s, since Michael von Biel's and Mauricio Kagel's music for strings, there are theatrical implications of this pure and absolute music, which was originally written for the princely chamber but rather shows tendencies today that point to the musical studio theatre and pose an opposite to the explicitly theatrical genre of opera and musical theatre. Ever since stage music turned into more than music for transformations and entre-act and was included in the running scene on stage as during the banquet in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and since the instruments played there were understood as present and almost acting figures, the early autonomous and practised music changed into a category of scenic music, which stands in opposition to opera, which is primarily developed through scene and the dramatic discourse, up till today. In this the mentioned pieces by Kurtág are true dramatic works. They do not require real scenery, because their theatrical imagination and simulation surpasses any dramatic reality.