

“*Tempi passati*” or “*Tempi da venire ...?*”:
Seeking Melody in the Music
of Sándor Veress and György Kurtág

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I

In the music of both Sándor Veress and György Kurtág the melodic dimension must be regarded as the central category. Even after decades of exile in Switzerland, Veress still conjured up the enthusiasm derived from the rediscovery of Hungarian folk melodies at the beginning of his studies in Budapest in the late 1920s which had also opened up new perspectives on western art music. From the outset, the melodic impulse was strong enough to repress any orientation provoked by the achievements of West European avantgarde:

In a movement, where especially the age-old Hungarian folk song was discovered as something entirely new [...] there was no space and no necessity for Schönberg. Everything was melody to us that time, real melody.¹

This opinion can certainly be related to Veress’ entire output. Of course the writing-fashion of Hungarian composers of especially the generation of Veress largely depends on *melos*. The topic could thus easily be concluded with this numbingly trivial observation – if there was not some other point worth thinking about. In contrast to Bartók and Kodály and especially their epigones, a speaking quality in the melodic syntax is no longer readily available to Veress and Kurtág in the same way. Both became more and more interested in a new compositional treatment of the musical line that should lead beyond the stage of mere adaptation and mere repetition. To both, composing often means ‘seeking melody,’ in which the sought after object cannot appear in its ‘pure’ form. Nonetheless, the primary melodic statement re-

¹ Andreas Traub, ‘Sándor Veress: Lebensweg – Schaffensweg,’ in *Sándor Veress: Festschrift zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Andreas Traub, Berlin: Haseloff 1986, p. 30. – In the paper presented here all quotations are originally German except from Veress’ ‘New Trends’-text (see note 3). We wish to express our gratitude to Mr. Jeremy Llewellyn (Basel) for his support in all questions concerning English translation.

mains a basic necessity to Veress and Kurtág, whereas its dogmatic refutation is still a clear distinctive mark of self-styled progressive composers. Veress' and Kurtág's different ways of dealing with this historically worn-out musical quality are highly individual and illuminate artistic positions to be located in the field of conflict between tradition and avant-garde.

II

"Everything was melody to us that time." Sándor Veress' lifelong ideology of melody sprang from this euphoria of his early days in Budapest. 'Seeking melody' in his case is to be seen in the tension between a kind of official aesthetics and moments diverging therefrom, especially in his late works. In his years of exile Veress quickly saw himself transported into "a time [...] that stands under the sign of melody's destruction and with this, the destruction of the backbone of music."² An over-exaggerated opposing point of view (masking an explicit statement concerning his own understanding of 'modernity') can be made out from the way he reacted to this situation in essays and lectures. With a polemical purpose, he transformed 'melody' into a battle cry against "paramusical phenomena"³ of the post-war avant-garde. However, for Veress viewing melody as a defining moment of music does not by any means entail a permanently well-formed linear string as "the principal bearer of the musical event."⁴ Sometimes it seems that the category becomes a chiffre for a more general conception of compositional technique (*Tonsatz*) which privileges part-writing in a broader sense and which is not predetermined as serial. Veress never entirely rejected this conception, even in those works of the 1960s like the *String Quartet Concerto* which were relatively tightly controlled with respect to the application of row procedures and with which he edged towards the avant-garde.

With such a deliberately polemic position there was no room for the idea that in a particular historical or artistic situation *melos* could mutate into a dimension unreadily reachable. And there was also no room for the idea that this exclusively had the potential to become the motor for composition. That the composer Veress himself landed in exactly this situation shall be exemplified by a single work only, his *Orbis tonorum* for chamber orchestra,

² Sándor Veress, 'Béla Bartók's 44 Duos für zwei Violinen,' in *Erich Doflein: Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Lars Ulrich Abraham, Mainz: Schott 1972, p. 57.

³ Sándor Veress, 'New Trends in European Music since World War II,' undated English-written typescript (15 pp.), probably from the 1960s (Sándor Veress Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel), p. 12.

⁴ Sándor Veress, *Aufsätze, Vorträge, Briefe*, ed. Andreas Traub, Hofheim: Wolke 1998, p. 96.

completed in 1986. This eight-movement cycle with its titular allusion to Comenius' companion *Orbis sensualium pictus* can be looked upon as a central piece in Veress' late works. Crucial for the following considerations is the relationship of its outer movements.

Tempi passati, the short tripartite movement of the beginning, turns out to be an outright demonstration of *melos*-driven composing. Here, Veress tries to realise his concrete ideal of melody that was shaped, roughly speaking, not least by folk song, Renaissance counterpoint and Bartók.⁵ The first 10 bars (*Examples 1a–b*) show that it consists of long well-balanced lines with non-periodical phrases that are themselves very flexible rhythmically and can be ornamented. Obviously an older musical attitude is employed without attempting a *pastiche*. It emerges as an artificial mingling: the oboe line begins with a succession of all 12 pitch classes; however this melodic segment does not function as a row but fits homogeneously into a so-called "12-note tonality,"⁶ whose central note is *A*. This tonality is realised vertically with a triadic harmony untypical for Veress.

To use an illuminating term of Andreas Traub, the example of *Tempi passati* demonstrates in a striking way that compositional structures can be layered with "*Zeitschichten*" (historical/temporal strata).⁷ It is precisely this phenomenon of historical referentiality that Veress raised to a specific programme in *Orbis tonorum* and its cyclical conception. In most of the movements idioms, stylistic elements or forms of modality are employed which do not represent the state-of-the-art materials with respect to his late works. Yet it should be noted that Veress even here 'speaks with his own voice' and identifies himself with these many-layered artistic products. But this is music about music, art which lacks sheer immediacy. Music's aesthetic position can be located in *Orbis tonorum* only in cyclical configurations; or else, in cases like the second movement *Siciliano nostalgico* where the initially affirmed idiom is called into question even within the course of the movement, as will be shown later.

The vanishing point of the entire work is the final movement *Tempi da venire...?* Viewed from this point it is unmistakable that a *melos* like in *Tempi passati* only comes at the price of a stylized attitude. In *Tempi da venire...?* Veress reaches an experimental position far from any historicising. The

⁵ See Veress, *Aufsätze, Vorträge, Briefe*, p. 75 and *passim*.

⁶ Veress, *Aufsätze, Vorträge, Briefe*, p. 129 (programme note for the first performance of *Orbis tonorum*).

⁷ Andreas Traub, *Zeitschichten: Zum "Orbis tonorum" (1986) von Sándor Veress*, Saarbrücken: Pfau 1999.

Andante poco moto ♩ = 72 ca

Oboe
Clarinetto in Si b
Fagotto
Arpa
Celesta
Xilofono
Percussione
Violino I
Violino II
Viola
Violoncello
Contrabbasso

Andante poco moto ♩ = 72 ca

p espr. *mf*
p *pizz.* *arco*
p

Example 1a: Veress, *Orbis tonorum*, first movement, mm. 1–5

questioning title indicates an increasingly central perspective relevant for Veress, that is, a historical and cultural pessimism. In this perspective *Tempi da venire...*? nevertheless does not mean a composed negation, but an approach to articulation. What is presented, can be described as a kind of musi-

Example 1b: Veress, *Orbis tonorum*, first movement, mm. 6–10

cal still life entitled 'Seeking melody'. The narrow gestural repertoire of the complete movement is presented in its entirety in the first 14 bars (*Examples 2a–b*). Veress' typical motivic manoeuvring with intervallic constellations prevails. On this basis he is searching for a 'valid,' interactive relationship between the horizontal dimension and a free 12-note harmony. But the potential to turn those elements presented – pitch, interval, and beat – into a figure (*Gestalt*) is suspended.

Example 2a: Veress, *Orbis tonorum*, eighth movement, mm. 1–6

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system covers measures 7 to 11, and the second system covers measures 12 to 17. The instrumentation includes Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet in Si-flat (Cl. in Si b), Cello (Cel.), Trombone (Tbg.), Violin I (Vl. I), Violin II (Vl. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (mp, p), articulation (accents), and performance instructions (P.G., c.m., s.c.). Section markers A and B are present above the Oboe staff.

Example 2b: Veress, *Orbis tonorum*, eighth movement, mm. 7–17

They remain elementary, come together, at the most as jagged melodic fragments, rhythmically monotonous and without any sort of ornamentation. A certain stretching-out of such sections and motivic elements belongs to the form concept of this final movement. However, the formation of a primary *melos* that would constitute a sense of formal directional flow is never reached.

Particularly informative at this point would be a thoroughgoing comparison with the beginning of Veress' *Clarinet Concerto*,⁸ dating from the years 1981–82. Here the first seven bars present a virtually identical texture which leads into a woodwind gesture, as in *Tempi da venire...?* In the *Concerto*, this gesture is adopted immediately from the solo instrument. It is used as a diastematic cell and as an energetic impulse for the unravelling of a wide-ranging *parlando rubato melos*. In stark contrast, such gestures in *Tempi da venire...?* bring about a sudden silence. In the long term, the bassoon-*gruppetto* (bar 13) is revealed itself as a motive for the middle section of the movement (bars 47–62). However, that which the *gruppetto* actually motivates is solely its self-perpetuation in a freewheeling contrapuntal mechanism.

According to the implicit laws of this movement, a more or less intact melodic figure cannot emerge from within. It can only arise by another means: by quotation. As an *objet retrouvé* the first phrase of the “simple modest melody”⁹ from *Tempi passati* is placed at the end of the entire work (*Example 3*). Veress quotes now (bars 86–87) only a faded and scarcely ornamented version of the melody which is fragmented by rests and is no longer receptive to harmonisation, and such a handling seems to be a consequence of the particular stage of composing reached in *Tempi da venire...?* Obviously the thematic quotation fulfils the topos of a cyclical bridge in a purely musical fashion as well. Yet the epilogue beginning in bar 83 acquires a further dimension through another *objet retrouvé*, namely the harp-phrase in bars 88–89. Here the end of the opening movement of Veress' *First String Quartet* of 1931 (his opus 1, so to speak) is cited fragmentarily. In 1986, which marked the completion of *Orbis tonorum*, Veress was suffering from cancer. The harp-passage “is undoubtedly to be understood as the signature with which he now intended to complete his output” comments Andreas Traub.¹⁰ However it can also be read in another manner: the fade-out of the decelerating rhythmic pulse on the drum

⁸ For a detailed analysis see Andreas Traub, ‘Sándor Veress: Konzert für Klarinette und Orchester’, in *Melos* 49/1 (1987), pp. 65–84.

⁹ Veress, *Aufsätze, Vorträge, Briefe*, p. 129.

¹⁰ Traub, *Zeitschichten*, p. 8.

K 80 **Meno mosso** $\text{♩} = 40$

Ob. *mf*

Cl. *in Si \flat* *p (rubato)*

Arpa *f*

K **Meno mosso** $\text{♩} = 40$

I. VI. *mf* *pp*

II. *mf* *pp*

Vla. *pp*

Vc. *pp*

Cb. *pp*

85 *Cl. in Si \flat*

Arpa *mp*

Tamb. gr. [s.c.] c.l. *mp*

Cb.

ripete ad libitum sempre diminuendo e morendo...

Bern, A.D. 1986

Example 3: Veress, *Orbis tonorum*, eighth movement, mm. 80–90

and the fragments of a memory of a composer's life on the clarinet and harp mould together into a literal *morendo*, a metaphor of death.

Contrary to expectations, the unrelated quotation from *Tempi passati* at the end of *Orbis tonorum* viz. the token that *melos* is not readily reachable in an alternative form did not prove to be Veress' last word on the subject. In his *Tromboniade*, a concerto for two trombones and orchestra from 1989–90, the same opening theme segment is taken up explicitly and programmatically once again. This occurs at the end of the second movement (*Example 4*) after more oblique references have been made in the course of the work. This drawn-out melodic line is the perfect demonstration of a new arrogation of a "Primacy of Melody."¹¹ There is a flip-side to the new revalidation of *melos* of this type: the obligation towards the construction and character of a slow symphonic finale, and that means the re-evocation of tradition, of 'tempi passati.'



Example 4: Veress, *Tromboniade*, second movement, mm. 170–179

III

In his artistic physiognomy Kurtág differs from Veress remarkably. This came to the fore early on: according to Kurtág's own report, his composition studies with Veress at the Liszt Ferenc Academy in post-war Budapest were not of a very productive nature.

I have always been very late with everything and I mainly skipped composition lessons. As I felt I could not understand Veress and later Ferenc Farkas in the right way, I regarded Ligeti as my actual teacher.¹²

¹¹ Veress, *Aufsätze, Vorträge, Briefe*, p. 97.

¹² Friedrich Spangemacher, 'Mit möglichst wenig Tönen möglichst viel sagen: Ein Gespräch mit dem Komponisten György Kurtág,' in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 13./14. Juni 1998, p. 65.

Kurtág's initial difficulties as a composer could not have been completely dissolved in the mediation of pure compositional craftsmanship; he needed to locate his artistic identity beforehand. Understandably, Veress in his quite traditional teaching method could not do very much for him. Kurtág soon began clinging to his fellow student Ligeti, who at the outset of his career was troubled by similar problems. Only some time after having graduated in composition and having written numerous early works did Kurtág manage to find his own way. After the political catastrophe of 1956 and a heavy personal and creative crisis it was the psychologist Marianne Stein who, during a stay in Paris from 1957 to 1958, led him to finally accept his legesthenia-like constitution into his musical writing. Now Kurtág learned to make creative profit out of his predicament. The hard-won new beginning of the *String Quartet*, programmatically labelled 'opus 1,' took place after an extreme concentration of the artistic perspective. From now on, compositional problems no longer consisted in relying on general conventions, but in attempts to probe the particular within the context of the most elementary musical correspondences.

Thus, Kurtág's actual weakness became his artistic capital. In his music, focusing pre-lingual or pre-compositional elements and processes of finding a language assume great importance. The goal of such efforts is no longer the reconstruction of a functioning melodic syntax, but the concentrated view on the single gesture itself. Especially in Kurtág's most recent works it is the *melos* that proves to be the actual place of gestural compression in a more and more monodic sense. Central melodic figures are stammering, sighing.

Kurtág's special way of dealing with melodic traditions can be exemplarily shown in a short examination of "Mi is a szó?" op. 30a (1990), the Beckett monody written for Ildikó Monyók. Here, the imaginary vanishing point of an intact and elaborate melodic idiom is given by the theme of the second movement of Bartók's *Second Violin Concerto*. Veress regarded

this Andante tranquillo as maybe the most beautiful slow movement Bartók has ever written. [...] This splendid composition is like a greeting from an epoch, where the melody still rightfully held the seat of honour in music.¹³

For Kurtág, Bartók's melody is not only of historical, but also of highly personal relevance. In post-war Budapest, he was one of the very few pianists capable of playing the piano score of the concerto for a long time and he had

¹³ Sándor Veress, 'Béla Bartók, Konzert für Violine und Orchester,' in *Mitteilungen der Bernischen Musikgesellschaft* (März–Juni 1979), pp. 4, 8.

rehearsed it intensively with Ede Zathureczky. Moreover, his own *Viola Concerto*, written in 1953–55 to fulfil the requirements of a degree at the academy, shows a strong influence of Bartók's concerto. Three-and-a-half decades later Kurtág builds up a large form in order to spell out Bartók's melody anew. The formal process of "Mi is a szó?" is marked out as constant failures of the attempts at speaking in a melodically elaborate manner; within these, various types of Hungarian declamation are touched upon, but never developed, as they permanently fold back in on the initial stammer "mi ... is ... a ... szó."

In an *arioso*, *omaggio a Bartók* Kurtág finally attempts to take hold of the entire violin melody (op. 30a, bars 64–65). This *arioso* is no adaptation, but stigmatised by the form-generating principal of the composition: 'elaborate' *melos* cannot be enunciated by the composing subject itself, but only be quoted insufficiently. Bartók's melody seems to have passed a filter of defective memory, where the original form of the melody has almost entirely faded. Furthermore, the half-remembered diatonic model of the *arioso* is actively obliterated by a neutralising chromatic descending scale on repeating the same verse. The piece ends up in the stammering of the opening which, in consequence of the gestural exhaustion of form, has sunk into the lowest register. The benefit of this 'seeking' is not a proper melody in a Bartókian sense, but a fractured form grown out of single gestural segments. Kurtág succeeded in building up his own vocal 'musica ricercata' that, unlike Ligeti's piano work, cannot conclude with an ideal disposition given by a final *omaggio a Frescobaldi*.

In the expansive new version *What is the Word* op. 30b (1991) Kurtág placed his monody in an extra-literary frame of instrumental prologue and dramatic epilogue. Two bars before the beginning of the recitation, the concert hall is shaken by an enormous *tutti*; this 'overture' is the non-vocal pre-requisite of the exhaustion of a *melos* that consists only of fragments. Only after every ounce of energy is dissipated, the monody arrives in an "unbearably slow" pace (*Example 5a*). In its consequence, this measure can be compared to the end of Veress' *Siciliano nostalgico* (*Example 5b*), the second movement of *Orbis tonorum*, on which Andreas Traub makes a revealing comment:

This fortissimo beat is of a violence, that is not only singular in *Orbis tonorum*, but in the entire late work of Veress. It seems, as if the 'image' of 'Tempi passati' itself is smashed, the illusion torn apart. One finds oneself – where? In the following bars there are only single splinters of music left.¹⁴

¹⁴ Traub, *Zeitschichten*, p. 10.

The musical score is divided into three sections: A (Larghissimo), B (Larghissimo), and C (Untrüglich langsam). The instrumentation includes woodwinds (Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Trumpet, Trombone, Tuba), strings (Violin, Viola, Violoncello, Contrabass), percussion (Percussion 1, Percussion 2, Timpani, Cymbal, Arpa, Vibraphone), and voice (Recitator). The score features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes, and dynamic markings such as ff, mp, and p. The text "G.C. collages e feltera" is written above the Percussion 1 part. The score is written in a handwritten style with many annotations and markings.

Example 5a: Kurtág, Samuel Beckett: *What is the Word* [...], op. 30b, mm. A–a

The musical score is for Samuel Beckett's *What is the Word* by György Kurtág. It is a large-scale work for a vocal ensemble and a large instrumental ensemble. The score is divided into two systems. The top system features vocal parts: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass, and a Narrator (Recit). The lyrics "what is the word" are repeated across the vocal parts. The bottom system features a large instrumental ensemble including Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Trumpet (Cr.), Trombone (Tr.), Cymbal (Cimb.), Arpa (Arpa), Vibraphone (Vibr.), Percussion (Perc.), Violoncello (Vcl.), and Piano (Pf.). The score includes various dynamic markings such as *Prestissimo, geflüstert* (whispered), *pp* (pianissimo), and *pp<=>*. There are also tempo markings like *Moderato, lento*. The score is marked with circled numbers 1, 2, 3, 4 and letters C, d, e, f, indicating specific sections or measures. The vocal parts have lyrics in both English and Hungarian, such as "what is the word" and "mi a szó".

Example 5a (cont.): Kurtág, Samuel Beckett: *What is the Word* [...], op. 30b, mm. b–d

Ob. *f* *mf* **G** rit.

Cl. *f* *mf*

F. *f* *mf*

Arp.

Cel.

Xil.

Ptto Gr.

Tamtam

Gr. C.

I *f* *mf* **G** rit.

VI. *f* *mf*

II *f* *mf*

Vla. *f* *mf*

Vc. *f* *mf*

Cb. *f* *arco* *mf*

Example 5b: Veress, *Orbis tonorum*, second movement, mm. 31–33

34 $\text{♩} = 60 \text{ ca}$

Ob.

Cl.
in Si

Fg.

Arpa
E: F# G# A#
H: C# D#
gliss. rapido

Cel.

Xil.

tr. gr.

tam. tam.

Gr. C.

$\text{♩} = 60 \text{ ca}$

I
VL

II

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

fff *p* *mp* *p* *gliss. rapido* *p flautato* *arco*

Example 5b (cont.): Veress, *Orbis tonorum*, second movement, mm. 34–36

37 H

Ob. *p*

Cl. in Si *b* *p*

Fg. *p*

Arpa *p* *mp* *p*

Cel.

Xil. *p* *p*

Perc.

I *mf* *p* *p*

II *p* *p* *p*

Vla. *p* *p*

Ve. *p* *mp*

Cb. *p*

Example 5b (cont.): Veress, *Orbis tonorum*, second movement, mm. 37–40

In the *epilogo scenico* Kurtág presents a new version of his unpublished piece *Utolsó utáni beszélgetés Kovács Zsuzsával* [Post-ultimate conversation with Kovács Zsuzsa] for groaning violinist and piano from 1990.¹⁵ As a result of the formal exhaustion, the epilogue now only consists of one single microtonally inflected *sospirando* that still surpasses the pre-lingual character of stammering.

Enunciation has been lost, three notes, a groan, some gesticulations are the last possible statements.¹⁶

A revealing aspect of the new op. 30b-version of *Utolsó utáni beszélgetés* can be seen in the relation between melody and ornament. The microtonally charged *sírató*-figure is projected into space and embellished more and more with ornaments, until primary *melos* is threatened by suffocation. The residual *dirge*-figure seems to degenerate into a sort of turn that no longer decorates anything, but drifts around in the melodic vacuum of the epilogue.

In his article *Der Homo ornans in der Musik*¹⁷ Veress has shown that ornamentation practice is no culinary extra to a melody, but in folk music the actual feature of its identity. For Veress, the individual character of a melody reveals itself in the ornament. He notices the decline of melodic forms of communication in which the ornament has lost an inner relation to its object. In the new setting of his own music Kurtág reaches this stage of decline: The figure as a pre-lingual, mimetic trace is no longer connected with the enunciation of well-founded *melos*, but rather to be experienced as loose *ornatus*.

In *Életút* op. 32 for 2 basset-horns and 2 pianos, written in 1992 for the 85th birthday of Veress, these typical features collect even more thickly. The microtonal ultra-*sospirando* of the epilogue of op. 30b has frozen into the permanent quartertone-*scordatura* of the pianos. The characters of the composition revolve around an anhemitonical *colinda* melody which could derive from Veress' or Kurtág's Romanian native regions. Similar to Bartók's *Andante*, this simple melody cannot appear unchanged; it is either broken into instrumental parts or violently chromatised into a highly expressive *dirge*.

In the verbal motto of the final slow part of *Életút* Kurtág identifies Veress as Prospero, Shakespeare's wise magician, who completed his work in an island-exile. Moreover, Kurtág seems to refer to Veress' ornament theory in a

¹⁵ Ms. in the György Kurtág Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel.

¹⁶ *Ligeti und Kurtág in Salzburg: Programmbuch der Salzburger Festspiele*, ed. Ulrich Dibelius, Stuttgart/München: Oktagon 1993, p. 76.

¹⁷ Sándor Veress, *Aufsätze, Vorträge, Briefe*, pp. 103–123.

most direct fashion: At first, the basset-horns declaim extensive and unadorned melodic lines; in a *da capo* Kurtág belatedly captures rich *ornatus*. Thus, the ornaments do not organically react with the naked melodic skeleton, but rather remain alien. After some weakly remembered *colinda* echoes, the music ends with a last pentatonical *parlando*-figure sounding from afar.

Kurtág's *melos* is no longer related to large syntactic nor architectonic dimensions. The end of melodic seeking is the highly-charged single gesture that, as in the coda of *Életút* or the epilogue of op. 30b, tends rather towards silence than towards sound. An extreme consequence of this tendency is to be seen in some of Kurtág's recent miniatures where he completely abstains from formally inducing his material. In pieces like *Virág Zsigmondy Dénesnek*, form and gesture almost fall into one. What remains are merely figures of sighing and stammering, simple scales or other isolated elements, which can be related to one another only by the compilatory method of the so-called 'composed program.'