

Links and ligatures: György Kurtág's
Ligatura-Message to Frances-Marie
(*The answered unanswered question*), op. 31b

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*Signes et rides sont questions
et réponses d'une même encre.*

Edmond Jabès

La réponse est le malheur de la question

Maurice Blanchot

Completed on June 22nd 1989 as it was, the *Ligatura-Message to Frances-Marie (The answered unanswered question)*, op. 31b by György Kurtág can be played in three different manners– the orchestration is indicated by the composer in the preface to the piece:¹

Version 1: violoncello with two bows, two violins, celesta

Version 2: two violoncellos, two violins, celesta

Version 3: two organs, celesta (or upright piano).

The concept of spatial layout is also touched upon in this note: the cellos are placed “in the middle of the room (i.e. on the stage)” while the violins should be posted “far away from the solo violoncello, on the highest level of the hall, if possible”, and the celesta “far away from the center, but nearer to the violins than to the solo violoncello.” The dedicatee of this piece, Frances-Marie Uitti, owned the copyright of version 1 until 1999. In point of fact this cellist has developed a two bow technique: this new approach seems to have aroused the keen interest of Kurtág and that of such composers as Luigi Nono, Giacinto Scelsi, Jonathan Harvey, Guus Janssen, Jay Alan Yim, Richard Barrett, Vinko Globokar, Clarence Barlow, James Clarke, David Dramm, Geoffrey King, Martijn Padding, Horazio Radulescu, who have written for Uitti using this technique.²

¹ *Ligatura-Message to Frances-Marie (The answered unanswered question)*, op. 31b, Budapest: EMB (Z. 13 957) 1995. [Foreword:] ‘Instrumentation,’ p. 3, and score pp. 4–7.

² From Uitti’s own internet link. About the two bows’ function: “The two bows can move independently in a vertical sense: the under bow playing very close to the bridge while the upper bow is *sul tasto*. They can slide smoothly to the ordinary position and reverse the sense while moving horizontally. [...] The two bows can produce independent articulations, accents, durations, *legati* etc. [...] Due to the thickness and tension of the strings, not all theoretically imaginable 4 note combinations are practical. [...] For the 4 note-chords, the overbow touches D & G, and the underbow A & C.”

Larghissimo (ma sempre andante)

Poco più lento, strascinato, ma sempre quasi andante

Vcl: solo

Example 1: *Ligatura-Message to Frances-Marie*

An answer to Ives?

Since the central issue in this piece does consist in a questioning process generating a dialogue, the title ‘answers’, responds to the famous *Unanswered Question*, the orchestral piece composed by Charles Ives in 1908.³

³ Charles Ives, *The Unanswered Question*, Southern Music Publishing Co. Inc., 246-5, 1953. Luigi Dallapiccola also wrote an answer to Ives (*Three Questions with Two Answers*) in 1962: “The three questions are: ‘Who am I? Who are you? Who are we?’” uttered by “three thematic groups of three notes each. [...] Of the two answers, the first is peaceful, optimistic and feminine (centred around a flute solo), while the second is harsh, pessimistic and masculine (based on a descending figuration of three notes at wide intervals). The third and final answer is lacking; to be found only at the close of *Ulysses*.” (Foreword to the score, Milan: Suvini Zerboni, S. 8155 Z, 1977). It seems obvious that the Italian composer relies upon lacks, absence, hesitation and the hesitancy and doubt aroused by the absence of the third answer; not unlike Kurtág’s work, Dallapiccola’s piece remains open-ended, in the ever-defeated expectancy of a conclusive answer.

The image displays a musical score for Example 1 (cont.). It features two systems of music. The first system consists of a piano part (piano) and a violin part (Vcl: solo). The piano part is written in treble clef and contains two staves, with notes grouped by dashed circles. The violin part is in bass clef and includes the instruction "come prima, ma ritardando poco a poco dim. al fine". The second system continues the piano part with two staves, also with notes grouped by dashed circles. The violin part continues with two staves, labeled "1" and "2", and includes the instruction "come prima, ma ritardando poco a poco dim. al fine". The score is marked with double bar lines and repeat signs.

Example 1 (cont.)

From the general structure of Ives's work, Kurtág keeps the orchestration in groups, the spatial layout, and the natural alternation of question/answer whose substance is less obvious than it is in Ives's case: the patterns of question/answer share a number of features and do not make the job of telling them apart any the easier. The celesta, which turns up only for three conclusive chords, seems to have no correspondent in Ives's score (Kurtág says that it might be dropped, as for the world premiere); this might be an extra component devised by Kurtág in order to answer the question in a final manner – that is why the subtitle seems to intimate precisely that. However we shall soon realise that ambivalence prevails in a supreme manner and that the

The image shows a musical score for Example 1 (cont.). It consists of three systems of staves. The top system has two staves, with the upper staff marked 'poco più ardente' and 'ppp'. The middle system has two staves, with the upper staff marked 'poco più ardente'. The bottom system has two staves. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings.

Example 1 (cont.)

dialectics of answer/question is an issue which transcends the problematic element represented by its oxymoronic title.

On the other hand, the dialogue, in the American composer's work, is completely unfolded between *three* protagonists:

[The strings] are to represent 'The Silences of the Druids – Who Know, See and Hear nothing.' The trumpet intones 'The Perennial Question of Existence,' and states it in the same tone of voice each time. But the hunt for 'The Invisible Answer' undertaken by the flutes and other human beings, becomes gradually more active, faster and louder through an *animando* to a *con fuoco*.

This is what Ives writes in the foreword to the score. Kurtág's ploy is quite clearly not an attempt to comprehend the transcendentalist philosophical temper of Ives's piece: it tends to contemplate the musical expression for a suspended answer – the question may be both answered and unanswered. Let us also put into relief the fact that Kurtág's work is half the length of Ives's (four minutes against eight minutes), and that the tempo variations are much fewer and not as marked, which, yet another time, conveys the impression of a kind of slow-moving *continuum*.

The image shows a musical score for Example 1 (cont.). It features several staves: two for Violins (Vic. 1 and Vic. 2), one for Viola (Vic. 2 ossia), one for Violoncello (Vcllo), and one for Celesta. The score includes dynamic markings such as *poco*, *molto*, and *(pesante)*. The Celesta part is marked *pppp*. The score is for Verőce, 1989, VI. 22.

Example 1 (cont.)

In Ives's piece, the strings and the trumpet stick to *largo molto sempre* (about 50 on the metronome), while the tempo of the flutes shifts from *adagio* (bar 20) to *con fuoco* (53) via *andante* (26), *allegretto* (34), *allegro* (41), *allegro molto* (47), *allegro (accelerando to presto)*, *molto agitando* (52–53). The *Unanswered Question* becomes more and more polyrhythmic, whereas, in Kurtág's work, the rhythmical superposition between the cello and the violins is only effective in the end, and the variations are minimal:

- *Larghissimo (ma sempre andante)*, for the cello (bar 1),
- *Poco più lento, strascinato, ma sempre quasi andante*, for the intervention of the violins (bar 9),
- *Come prima, ma esitando poco a poco diminuendo al fine*, for the cello's return (bar 15),
- *Poco più andante*, during the conclusive 'tutti' (bar 22).

Further differences crop up between Ives's and Kurtág's pieces. I shall only mention the main ones. In Ives's piece, the strings weave the backcloth of the work against which the question is stated by the trumpet; the places where 'the invisible answer' can be heard, played by the flutes, are less and less spaced out and more and more substantial. In Kurtág's piece, the cello is interrupted by the violins (*poco più lento, strascinato, ma sempre quasi andante*), but resumes (middle of page 5), uttering again the initial proposition-question, before conclusion (*poco più andante*), in a rhythmical superposition with the other participants in the exchange to which the celesta may be added (if it actually plays). This quick clausula – effectively played by the three groups of instruments – might delineate the answer. The difficulty of the rhythmical *décalage* is less important in Kurtág's piece, as the whole work proceeds in long note values; therefore, the effect is also toned down. The polyrhythmic perspective is nevertheless present; besides, Ives's language can be divided into three distinctive parts:

- The strings: triads,⁴ *ppp*.
- The trumpet: the rhythm is imperceptibly modified through a subtle interweaving of triplets and delayed beginnings. The nuance remains *p* or *pp*, and the last note of the melody may change (C or B).
- Finally, the flute quartet wants to achieve complete freedom in relation to the other instruments: the answer is varied, violent, at times fantastic or whimsical, jolly, harsh, in most diverse nuances and tempos. It is essentially different, as it has broken free from a set of constraints; it asserts and denies itself both on the level of melody and of rhythm. How could we expect any adequation whatsoever between worlds which are supposed to have exchanges within the scope of an 'existential' debate? (See *Examples 2a–c*.)

⁴ For an analysis of the triads of the strings, see Betsy Jolas, *Molto espressivo*. Textes rassemblés, présentés et annotés par Alban Ramaut, Paris: L'Harmattan 1999. Coll. 'L'itinéraire.' "Sur *The Unanswered Question*," pp. 133–137: "De simples accords parfaits à quatre parties? Sans doute, mais tels que rarement on ne les entendit, tels certainement qu'aucun traité n'osa jamais les recommander, leurs quatre sons non plus chaudement rassemblés, mais projetés en hauteur le long de colonnes immenses. Longuement immobiles. Le temps d'oublier notre temps quotidien, de se désaccorder. Je commence à comprendre. J'ai oublié ce qu'est un accord parfait." (p. 134).

Kurtág's works. However this is probably the moment when it achieves a greater accretion of meaning since it fits in so perfectly with the aporetic quality of the original question to which there is no such thing as a final answer. Thus, phrases such as tension/release, resolution/non-resolution find a meaning within the chords of Kurtág, which are, most of the time, built up with fifths (i.e. a consonant or neutral element) and semitones (i.e. a dissonant tense element).⁵ Let's repeat that the great difference with Ives lies in the fact that the American composer provides every item in his expression (strings, trumpet, flutes) with a tempo and a musical language of its own.

We might well be dealing with a question to which there is no thoroughly suitable answer; there is no real answer because, from an ironic and multiple viewpoint, the answer clears out, runs away and ultimately edges away from any conclusive ending up.⁶

In a similar way, Kurtág's answer will not be satisfying: undermined by this constructive antithesis as it is, the answer can merely reach a *certain* degree of validity: it can by no means reach out to truth itself; the radical and astounding antinomy inherent in its title is the hallmark of the concomitant prevalence of the answer and the non-answer. The dialogic form is doomed to hesitancy, vacillation, *unending open-endedness*. Now, does an unanswered question retain its authenticity? Must it renounce its status as a question or on the contrary does it take on a superior quality, which establishes its critical and philosophical validity?

Dialogue and non-dialogue

The title of this piece shows however that the dialogue actually operates since it literally expresses a link: 'ligatura' and 'message' imply the notion of contact, connection, exchange and produce an effect of near-redundancy, not unlike the great work in progress *Signs, Games and Messages*.

With respect to this piece, I will not dwell upon the rhythmic notation which distinguishes Kurtág's own way of writing and which, beyond the scope of measures, shapes the musical language in a fairly precise manner without hindering in any way the outstanding role of the instrumentalist. Because, let us face it, it is also upon *duration*, in its human, versatile, subjec-

⁵ The initial chords of the *Ligatura-Message* may be built according to the cycle used by Stephen Blum to analyse some *Kafka-Fragmente*, op. 24 (cf. his contribution in this volume, 'Kurtág's Articulation of Kafka's Rhythms'). See also the alternation between the 'darkness' of the flats and the 'brightness' of the sharps, in these initial chords.

⁶ The celesta may utter the answer, but it might be dropped...

tive, changeable forms that the whole of the sound-adventure of music is played out and dependent. Conversely, silence plays as important and as emotionalising a role. With Kurtág, the answer to the question does *and* does not occur: it seems to spring out from the intimate ties between the instrumentalists, in a flow of nearly complicit understanding. Whereas, in *The Unanswered Question*, opposition and conflict keep on recurring in sharp outlines, tautology stalks the *Ligatura-Message* – whether it be simply bypassed or cleverly stated – in view of the changing register of the string instruments (violins or cello).

As a result, the instruments answer each other within a single *in camera*, and the answer and question seem to melt into one homogeneous consistent discourse: one might describe it as one discursive entity, an ever-renewed question/answer pattern. Yet it is actually upon hesitancy and doubt that the overall design of the piece is built: the wording nags, 'bogged down' as it were in an awesome rhythmic regularity. The repetition of chords, whose construction offers striking similarities, paradoxically creates a sort of dissonant emptiness. Everything conspires to intimate malaise and drama, the tense quest for an answer.

So, I can suggest that Kurtág made use of his outspoken reference to Ives as a means of disclosing his musical expression of dialogue, of a dialectics of question and answer. It so happens that Kurtág's piece can only emerge in the frame of reference of a virtually expected answer, in the statement of a question whose resolution is pending: the answer would in some way mean the death of the question and the concomitant demise of the musical piece.

A work of art must ever be in search of the 'invisible answer,' in quest of the truth which rules artistic creation. Ceaseless searching, lack of answer condition the existence of a work of art which lives and expands in the open-ended area (of meaning) discovered by the questioning process; and this precedes the answer and ultimately the bestowal of meaning. The ruling principles of Kurtág's work might be labelled: link, homage, dialogue, memory, recall. The former are immediately perceptible in title and subtitle; the latter crop up in the sound-world of a piece which connects both with Ives's problematics of the 'musical question' and with Frances-Marie [Uitti] whose technique influenced Kurtág's writing. All these items are thus present in *Ligatura-Message* either on the level of the conditions of its make-up or on the level of its metatextual links. In point of fact, the dialogue is portrayed within the piece where question, answer, silence, doubt, hesitancy are

formulated; but outside the piece, the link between the various instrumental exchanges also wants to be a ‘ligatura’ between the composer and the instrumentalist. So the interpreter alone can weave the ‘ligatura,’ the mere link into a truly meaningful message. The title straightaway enhances this genuine hyphenation which it behoves the interpreter to animate, to bring to life in the work of art. Valéry used to say that style is “a protracted vacillation between sound and meaning”: in view of this, is not Kurtág’s op. 31b, in some way, a lesson in style?

Other Ligaturas in Kurtág’s output

I have not the time to show the links between the *Ligatura-Message* and the other Ligaturas by Kurtág; actually, the ‘ligatura’ is a musical notion and notation that can be often encountered in Kurtág’s works; here are just a few examples of pieces whose title and writing include the term:

- *Ligature e versetti*, for organ (1990).
- ‘*Ligatura x*’ and ‘*Ligatura y*’, from the 6th volume of *Játékok* (1993).⁷
- ‘*Kalandozás a múltban*,’ subtitled ‘*Ligatura Ligetinek születésnapra szeretettel*’ [‘Venturing into the past: a Ligature to Ligeti for his birthday, with love’], in the 7th volume of *Játékok* (1997).
- ‘*Ligatura y*’ also exists in two other versions: one for violin and viola (in *Signs, Games and Messages*, 1993) and one for string trio (idem, certainly revised in 1998).

Molto strascinato, sempre tenuto

Example 3a: ‘Ligatura x’, *Játékok*, vol. 6, initial bars

⁷ *Játékok*, vol. 6, Budapest: EMB, Z. 14068, 1997, pp. 40–41.



Example 3b: 'Ligatura y', *Játékok*, vol. 6, beginning

– The 'Ligatura-Hommage à Yehudi Menuhin' is a piece for two violins (*Signs, Games and Messages*, 1998).

By way of conclusion, I would say that the open-endedness of the answered unanswered question may be the space of the Kurtágian fragment. I am particularly eager to show that Kurtág, in his latest works, celebrates slowness while he does not radically alter his style in relation to his fragmentary productions. The components are reduced to a bare minimum and the development takes place within a single fragment. The key word, in this respect, is amplification within concentration. In the piece I have studied at some length, this amplification is central to the process of production: it is not mosaic-related but it operates from a comprehensive view to the gradual focusing on essential details. The rhythm of fragmentation seems to be a clue to, and a feature of the existence of a questioning process. The 'unanswered question' seems to provide the composer with a pattern, a horizon of expectation into which unexpected elements are inserted; ultimately, this appears to correspond to Roman Jakobson's definition of the stylistic feature as "defeated expectancy": this lays bare, at the core of Kurtág's creative process, the preoccupation with, the search for and the invention of style. Is the *Ligatura-Message to Frances-Marie* an answer to the 'perennial' unanswered question of music? Samuel Beckett's *Comment dire* (or *What is the word*) has no question mark; Kurtág's answer (if there is one) will certainly not end with a period.