

Mutual Roots of Musical Thinking: György Kurtág, Péter Eötvös and their Relation to Ernő Lendvai's Theories*

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“My mother tongue is Bartók” – a well known sentence, not only valid for and declared by György Kurtág, but also by his younger colleague Péter Eötvös, as confessed in an interview in 1995: “When I was a boy, Kodály admitted me to the conservatory, but musically I’m not influenced by him, more by Bartók. For me, he speaks the absolute mother tongue in music, a language I speak as a composer and as a conductor, too. With mother tongue in music I do not only mean the process of composing, but also the articulation. In this respect I really can’t distinguish between the acts of composing and conducting anymore. As a result of speaking this mother tongue, a special intonation, on which Bartók’s language had a forming influence, will appear in each work I conduct.”¹

During my conversation with Eötvös in July 2000 he talked about his relationship to Bartók in a very similar way. He stated that Bartók’s music had a very great influence on his own musical thinking, and this is true not only of a special part of Bartók’s oeuvre, but of his entire musical output. As Eötvös expresses it, it is just the same as with a mother tongue: “You use all the words”.² Eötvös got familiar with Bartók’s music during the lessons with his piano teacher Ernő Szegedi, where he played a lot of Bartók, and then later by playing Bartók’s orchestral works with colleagues, in four-handed arrangements at the piano. But the analytical view of Bartók’s music was mediated first and foremost through the theories of Ernő Lendvai.³ In

* Thanks to Martin Albrecht for reading and to David Beard and Alan E. Williams for correcting the essay concerning the English language. – Reprint of excerpts from Péter Eötvös, *Kosmos* by kind permission of Editions Salabert Paris, from Kurtág’s sketches by kind permission of Paul Sacher Stiftung Basel and of *Játékok* of Editio Musica Budapest.

¹ Péter Eötvös, “Ich sehe mich als ‘Testpiloten’ für Neue Musik”, in: Renate Ulm (ed.), *Eine Sprache der Gegenwart, musica viva 1945–1995*, Mainz 1995, p. 336. Translation S. H.

² Interview with Péter Eötvös, Berlin 11. 07. 2000.

³ Cf. among others Ernő Lendvai, *Béla Bartók. An Analysis of his Music*, London 1971.

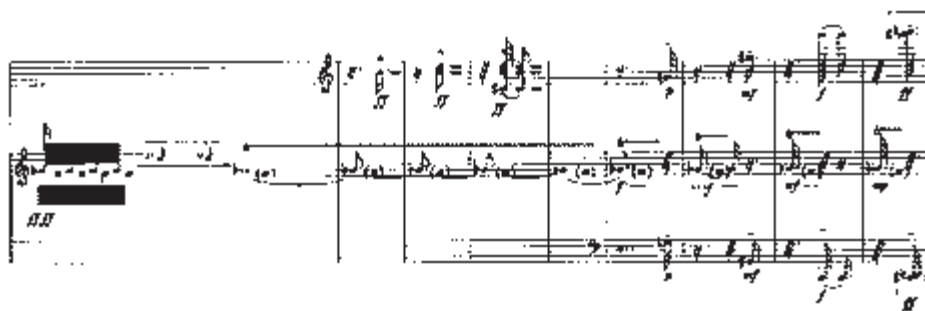
Eötvös' view, this theorist was just as important for Kurtág as for himself. He recounts that although one took note of the Viennese school, only Lendvai's analysis of Bartók's music was really relevant. In the early 60s, Eötvös was fascinated by Lendvai's lectures given in Budapest. At that time, Lendvai sometimes used an "adding machine" to analyse Bartók's compositions with regard to the "golden section", the "axis system" and forms of symmetry, aspects he also expounded in his writings. In Eötvös' view, this is a method of analysis which, in contrast to any historical method, gets to the roots of Bartók's music, and which he nowadays still claims as "fantastic".

For present purposes, I cannot follow the critique of Lendvai's methods and I do not want to so, because for the composers, Lendvai's theories were not only valid as a method of analysis, a way of approaching Bartók's music, but also as a stimulus for their own creative process.

The principle of thinking about music in intervallic relations, which is central to Lendvai's theory, has such a determining influence on Eötvös that even today he claims "it won't go out of my mind".⁴

Eötvös' relationship to Bartók, as well as his intervallic approach, can be pursued in several of his compositions. One of the most convincing is *Kosmos* for piano, not only because of its easily comprehensible length but also because of the fact that Eötvös recomposed this early composition (which was originally written in 1961) twice in 1985 and 1999. This recomposing shows his continuing interest in intervallic structure.

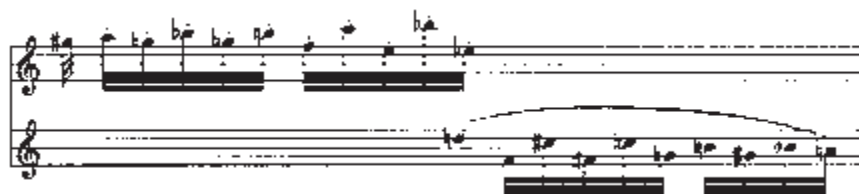
The opening of intervallic space is the central idea of the composition. It starts with a trill-like figure on g-flat and f, forming a minor second, the smallest possible distance in a non-microtonal system. Even in the very first section, the intervallic space is broadened symmetrically (*Example 1*).



Example 1: Péter Eötvös, *Kosmos* (1961), mm. 1–9

⁴ Interview with Péter Eötvös, 8. 12. 1999.

The range of the ostinato-like pitches in the middle register increases constantly and is filled out chromatically: in the 2nd section, g adds to f and g-flat, in the 3rd section a-flat increases the ambitus to 3 and so on until the climax embraces f¹ to e² chromatically. After that, the ambitus decreases in the same way. Eötvös himself connects symmetrical opening and closing of intervallic space with his reception of Lendvai's theories. It can be observed not only at the higher structural level, but also in single phrases where the symmetrical opening and closing of intervallic space is used as a means of beginning and ending a section. Another example is the funnel-like melodic progression as can be found in *Example 2*.



Example 2: Eötvös, *Kosmos* (1961), part of m. 87

The concentration on intervallic structures becomes clear in a passage where Eötvös writes scales based on the white and black keys of the piano, but comments in the score: “Not the scale, but the intervals are important” (*Example 3*).



Example 3: Eötvös, *Kosmos* (1961), part of m. 72

And even in single chords, a structural dependence on Lendvai can be observed. The chords based on interval symmetry in the parts of interval ambitus 2 of *Kosmos* (parts which are themselves symmetrical) clearly resemble to Lendvai's “Alpha chords” (*Example 4*).

The connection between this piece by Eötvös and Bartók goes beyond the structural and formal characteristics. Eötvös not only refers to the atmosphere of Bartók's *Az éjszaka zenéje*, but additionally, in the 4th section of *Kosmos* the



Example 4a: Lendvai's Alpha chords (cf. Ernő Lendvai, *Béla Bartók. An Analysis of his Music*, London 1971, p. 56). Example 4b: Eötvös, *Kosmos* (1961), m. 33

intervallic range of a major third is shaped in the form of a quotation of the beginning of *Az éjszaka zenéje*. Eötvös himself named *Kosmos* a kind of improvisation on the chromatic cluster of Bartók's composition.

The central idea of Eötvös' *Kosmos*, the opening and closing of intervallic space, is an important feature in some of Kurtág's sketches that are associated with his *Bornemisza Péter mondásai* [The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza], op. 7. In these sketches, Kurtág experiments with the smallest possible units of melodic cells and examines the relationships of three or more pitches in a very narrow intervallic space, mostly a major second or a minor third. The quality of opening and closing is a very important topic of these experiments, as can be shown in the following example, a sketch to be found in one of the *Bornemisza* sketchbooks (Example 5).

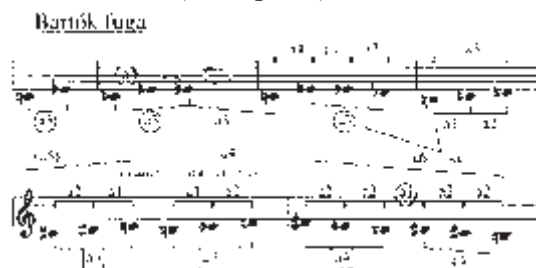


Example 5: György Kurtág, Sketch in sketchbook q (op. 7), p. 18

Interestingly, one of these sketches is labelled 'Eötvös gyakorlat' [Eötvös exercise], suggesting a direct relationship between these intervallic expeditions and Péter Eötvös. Even if Eötvös was already in Germany at the time these sketches were written, he still recalls Kurtág's and his joint research in intervallic problems. Nevertheless, so far there cannot be found a specific composition or sketch among Eötvös' oeuvre that might have direct links to Kurtág's 'Eötvös gyakorlat'.

In connection with the investigations just mentioned, and this means in the context of sketches for *Bornemisza Péter mondásai* op. 7, Kurtág analyses several compositions of Bartók, for the most part with regard to problems

emerging during his own compositional work. A prime example of reception theory is his analysis of the 'Fuga' of Bartók's *Sonata for Violin Solo*. Kurtág's attention here is directed to the structure of thirds and the internal intervals they are 'filled' with (*Example 6*).



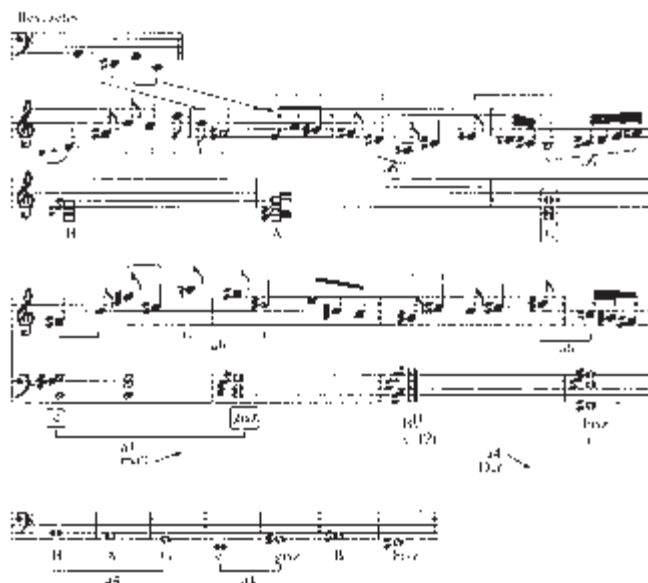
Example 6: Kurtág, Sketch in sketchbook q (op. 7), p. 31

That these considerations are connected with the intervallic structure of one of the central motifs of *Bornemisza Péter mondásai*, the "Bűn"- [Sin-] motive, becomes clear in a sketch found a few pages earlier. Here, a series of tests in the framework of a minor third lead to the funnel-structure typical of the Bűn-motive. The melodic line progresses through a continual reduction of intervallic ambitus (*Example 7*).



Example 7: Kurtág, Sketch in sketchbook q (op. 7), p. 38

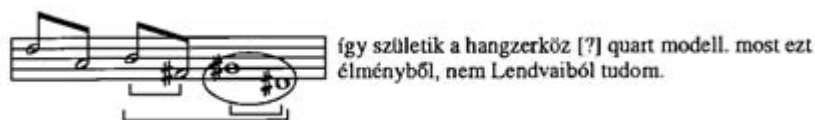
After a few more similar sketches Kurtág writes: "Miket tanultunk ugyan Bartóktól?" (What did we learn anew from Bartók?). The answer is to be found in the structure made of thirds in *Bornemisza Péter mondásai*. This is suggested also by another sketch in the same book, which is devoted to Bartók's *Second Violin Concerto*. The main emphasis of this analysis is first placed on structures of fourths in the first movement, but in the following, Kurtág pays attention to the harmonic construction of measures 6 to 14 of the first movement. Especially interesting is his reduction of the harmonic relations to be seen in the bass line. Here he explicitly names the major thirds between B, G, e, and g# (*Example 8*).



Example 8: Kurtág, Sketch in sketchbook q (op. 7), p. 38

Taken together, these two intertwined thirds result in the famous major-minor chord, which is, as Lendvai and others have shown, an important structural feature in Bartók's compositions. Melodic and harmonic relationships like these are to be found at central places of *Bornemisza Péter mondásai*.

Another example of Kurtág's application of Lendvai's theory in his analysis of Bartók and as a consequence in his own compositions is a sketch where Kurtág deals with the structure of fourths in Bartók's *Second Violin Concerto*. Here Kurtág explicitly names the link with Lendvai: "Most ezt élményből, nem Lendvaiból tudom." [Now I know it by experience, not from Lendvai] (Example 9).



Example 9: Kurtág, Sketch in sketchbook q (op. 7), p. 38

Kurtág's analysis of Bartók's *Piano Sonata* also relates to Lendvai's theory, although it is not admitted in the sketch. Here, Kurtág discovers a harmonic structure based on Lendvai's axis system, where for example G and C# are counterpoles and mutually exchangeable in function (Example 10).

[illegible]



Example 11a: Béla Bartók, *Second Violin Concerto*, 2nd movement, mm. 2–3

Example 11b: Kurtág, op. 30a, mm. 64–65

As can be seen in the example, Kurtág transposes the line up a minor ninth, and the falling fourth that closes the phrase is diminished to a major third. The ambitus is reduced to a major seventh, and the beginning of the second phrase is cut off. The notation of this line, without rhythmic articulation, is similar to Kurtág's analysis of Bartók's theme in his sketches. These sketches also indicate that Kurtág's op. 30 as a whole is neatly tied to the second movement of Bartók's *Violin Concerto*. As early as in sketchbook "h" of *Bornemisza Péter mondásai*, Kurtág writes down the first two measures of the Bartók theme and names the first measure as "a", and the second as "b". The "G" next to the systems refers to the tonality of the theme, and below we find the tonal functions (G-major as tonic, and the chords in measures 2 and 3 each as allusions to the secondary dominant, see *Example 12*).



Example 12: Kurtág, Sketch in sketchbook h (op. 7)

Following this, Kurtág writes down the melodic progression of the single variations of Bartók's second movement and transposes them to the same level. As underlying tonal degrees he indicates "G" for Variation I, "E" for Variation II and "Des" [D-flat] for Variation IV.

Although the motivic structuring of both versions of op. 30 seems at first sight to crumble and crack, and although a chromatic line seems the only possible one for the time being, one can discover a variational conception in a broader sense, even if there is no really strong theme at the beginning. The repeated fragments of text lend the composition a framework that suggests a kind of variation form. The basic motivic units are presented at the beginning:

The image shows a musical score for 'Ave Maria' by Franz Schubert. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The piano accompaniment is written on a single staff with a bass clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into two sections, A and B. Section A is marked with a bracket and a '1' above it. Section B is marked with a bracket and a '2' above it. The lyrics are written below the vocal line. The piano part includes a 'P' marking for piano.

In this composition, Kurtág produces tonal levels in several ways. Cadence-like closure of sections is to be found in different places, most of the time involving an intervallic constellation of a fifth and a tritone (that is: pitch class set 3–5 in Forte’s terminology). The appearance of this set can be interpreted as a reference to Bartók’s *Violin Concerto*: exactly this constellation is to be found at measure 2 of the 2nd movement, where c# modifies the tonic G-major. This chord was interpreted by Kurtág as an allusion to the secondary dominant A-major (*Example 14*).



Example 14b: Kurtág, op. 30a, mm. 5–6

⁵ Interestingly, the tonality of the 3rd variation is not named.

In Lendvai's axis system, these tonalities at the distance of a minor third correspond with each other. In the tonal shaping of the end of op. 30a one can assume an 'application' of the axis system, too: the last chromatically falling phrase beginning with measure 70 starts with g# and ends in measure 96 at g#. In Lendvai's axis system, G# belongs to the same axis as the F-major stressed in the Bartók-allusion of *Arioso I*.

Another allusion to the Bartók concerto can be found in the *Sinfonia* of *What is the Word*, op. 30b. On one side, Kurtág refers to a structural model that in his oeuvre is firmly connected with the gesture of sorrow and lament, as can be seen in several pieces of the *Játékok* named 'Sirató' [Dirge]. The chromaticism of this model (which Kurtág used already in his *String Quartet*, op. 1) is sharpened by the use of microtones here. On the other hand, the microtonal changes correspond exactly to the triple notes to be found in the first movement of Bartók's *Second Violin Concerto*, measure 303.

The microtonal circling around pitch d¹ in the *Sinfonia* refers to a tonal centre on d, supported by the g in piano and harp, and later on, d¹: a¹ and a¹: e² > d¹: a¹ are added. The emphasis on d can be related to the basic tonal framework of op. 30a. This version of the composition lasts 75 measures and ends, as does the corresponding phrase in op. 30b, with g#. Exactly in the middle of the piece, "d" is placed as a tonal centre by means of repetition and chordal allusions. In Lendvai's axis system, d and g# are counterpoles.

If one adds to this tonal framework the beginning of the piece "in a", this results again in pitch class set 3–5. This interpretation can be continued: the tonal framework of op. 30, a–d–g# could be interpreted as a transposition (a fifth up) of the mentioned pcs 3–5 in Bartók's 2nd movement, m. 2 (g–c#–d).

However, in the usage of tonal levels at the distance of a minor third and of centres a tritone apart we can see a decisive influence of Lendvai's theory on Kurtág's reading of Bartók and on his own compositions. Of course, elements of Lendvai's axis system also appear in Kurtág's compositions dedicated to him. In 'Lendvai Ernő in memoriam,' minor thirds are the central structural feature, and in 'Még egy szó Lendvai Ernőhöz,' a cadential structure typical of Lendvai's axis system can be observed (*Example 15*).

The piece starts with a chord built on minor and major thirds on c and ends on a, which belongs to the same axis as c. The ending confirms the tonic-like character of these axial tonalities: d functions as a subdominant, whereas b-flat and c# are substitutes of the dominant e.

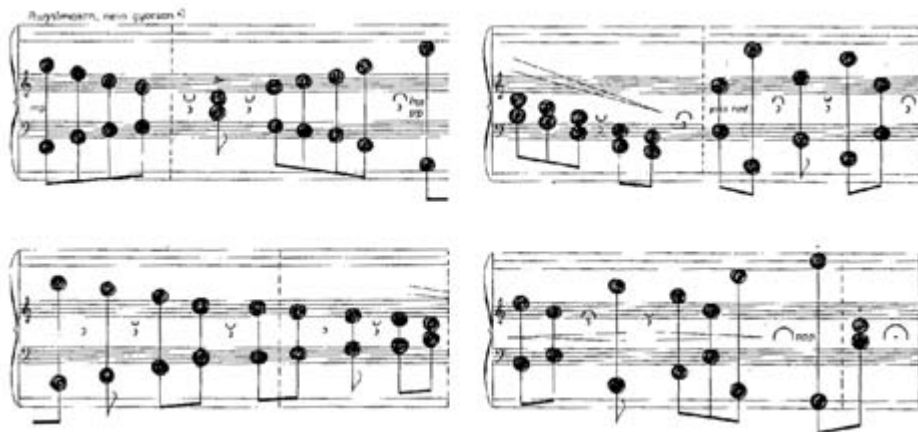
Example 15: Kurtág, 'Még egy szó Lendvai Ernőhöz,' *Játékok*, vol. VI

What in Kurtág's own view connects himself not only to Bartók, but also to Eötvös seems to be the idea of symmetry. Again the *Játékok* provide a convincing example: In 'Hommage à Bartók,' the interval space is opened symmetrically, and the same can be found, less strictly bound to certain pitches, in 'Hommage à Eötvös Péter' (Example 16).

This relationship to Eötvös is also obvious in the second homage, 'Levél Eötvös Péternek' which is a part of *Üzenetek*, op. 34. Here, the dodecaphonic structure is characterised not only by minor and major thirds, which lend it a quasi-tonal character. Additionally, the row presented in the beginning depends on interval-symmetry.



Example 16a: Kurtág, 'Hommage à Bartók,' *Játékok*, vol. I



Example 16b: Kurtág, 'Hommage à Eötvös Péter,' *Játékok*, vol. I

In connecting Eötvös' and Kurtág's compositions back to Bartók's music, one can observe that both composers' interpretations are mediated by Lendvai's theories. However controversial these might be regarded from a scientific point of view, for the composers they were an important source of 'inspiration.'