

Kurtág's Music: The Spectacle of Nature, the Breath of History – from op. 7 to 27

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Como

An analysis of Kurtág's music cannot avoid considering the primary importance taken by musical figures in the production of the Hungarian composer: figures not abstractly conceived, but whose immediate perceptibility and comprehensibility is undoubtedly set in an aesthetics of expression; sounding processes which have such precise direction and orientation even in a non-tonal context, that they can be easily recognized while listening to the score. Many composers of the second half of the 20th century adhere to this aesthetics, which is pregnant with history (as it dates back to 18th century)¹ from György Ligeti in Hungary to Bruno Maderna in Italy.² What is new however in Kurtág's music in my opinion is the extreme variety as well as pregnancy of musical figures and how the composer originates, than makes them multiply and live in his works: it happens through setting off formal processes of employment, which for their brevity and gestural force seem to allude to spontaneous processes of generation, of life and death of the natural world. There is a sort of "spirit-"ism in Kurtág's music which, more or less consciously, tends always to discover a dynamic force that can be turned into an evolving process: what is attractive for the composer in most of his pieces is in fact the initial movement of elementary cells, outwardly chaotic but none the less well organized, that broaden out in the course of the piece and invade the register (with moods some of which will be analysed), following precise strategies and directions. It is this inner mobility and energy that comes from this basic material, always in the course of transformation and irregular in its

¹ Cf. C. F. D. Schubart: *Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (Leipzig 1977; 1st ed. Wien 1806).

² That the form of Maderna's last works embodies and expresses an imaginative project is well demonstrated in G. Riva– A. Solbiati: "Progettualità formale nell'ultimo Maderna", M. Baroni – R. Dalmonte, ed.: *Studi su Bruno Maderna* (Milano 1989), 207–226.

own rhythm, that hints at processes and rhythms of biological development, as well as to the flow of the natural element.

Reference to nature in connection with composition techniques have been made in writings by Ernő Lendvai in his analysis of Bartók's works of the sixties: the discovery of axial harmony and "golden section" in that music made him throw a bridge between music's structures as well as proportions and those of nature (conscious the composer!³). Although Kurtág's music has revealed – by a preliminary analysis – neither the presence of golden section in its proportion, nor processes from darkness to light informed on the axial harmony (such as the one that opens Bartók's *Sonata for two pianos and percussions*, based on the two opposite polarities C–F#), one relation to the geometric, "natural" harmony can be made in connection to Kurtág's intervallic choices.

But we have arrived at the first focal point of our discussion: how generation is conveyed by the composer: Kurtág makes use of rhythmic cells at the beginning of his pieces or section of pieces, which have such small intervallic sizes, that they can be fundamentally brought back to the first numbers of the Fibonacci's series: 1, 2, 3, 5 (namely a single note, major second, minor third, perfect fourth): these cells undergo in the first bars of the work a process of chromatic filling and small widening, that leads to constituting a basic figure, can be a dense chords-structure or a creeping figure polarized in the register, always in transformation. The cell is identified as the propulsive heart of the drama, the generative matrix of the fundamental, elementary figures, which further emerge more clearly ways in the work from a matter still chaotic and formless becoming little by little animated.

One could object that Beethoven, Brahms and Bartók made formerly extensive use of melodic cells in their works (the last composer also of filled leaps), but it was a matter of thematic cells, whose motives transforming and varying in long spans are always leading: much different from Kurtág's cells, whose function is only generative of wider figures and structures; they disappear as recognized patterns after their early, crucial role.

Here is the second, focal point of discussion: how do natural elementary cells change into bigger figures and organisms, that is to say how does Kurtág intend musical form? We can summarize for clarity the main characteristics of form through five points:

³ Cf. R. Howat: 'Bartók, Lendvai and the principles of proportional analysis', *Musical analysis*, 1983, 69–95.

a) form is established by figure itself, as outlined after the above-mentioned generative process from a cell: now it develops its expressive potentialities in conformity with its inner shape (more melodic, more chordal, more rhythmical), without following a pre-established form;

b) "development" seems to me the best way to define the uninterrupted temporal process of figures, whose inner syntax is the most distant from the traditional symmetric partition in periods or the rhythmic quadrature, while it suggests the free flowing nature;

c) the term "development" is also applicable to the harmonic material, which, from the initial cell and figure, normally amplifies its pitch's spectrum (often to the entire twelve notes) and widens also its intervallic structures, such as its range;

d) an observation of the most recurrent intervallic structures in a specimen of Kurtág's works (but the analysis would have to be extended to a larger amount) has very often revealed harmonies based on some ratios of golden section: 8, 13 (minor sixth, augmented octave). Hence there is a prevalence of "natural" leaps;

e) very brief forms are employed, which are often independent sections of song-cycles or self-conceived movements of an unique instrumental work; they hold, in their brief way, developments stressed by a few, strong gestures that break out at the heightening of their "figural" process, that is the culmination of its life; after them only death and extinction can follow. The strongly gestural (sometimes "theatrical") component of Kurtág's music can be observed in each of his forms, marked by sudden dynamic irruptions, bright-coloured figures, lacerated timbres and torn clustered harmonies.

I will exemplify this interpretation of a new expressiveness in Kurtág's music that follows nature's rhythms through showing some articulations of figures and gestures which are particularly recurrent and demonstrating their generation from elementary cells; these examples are derived from very heterogeneous and chronologically distant works, so that they can constitute a significant specimen: op. 7 (*The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*, of the sixties), op. 17 (*Messages of the Late R.V. Troussova*, of the late seventies), op. 24 (*Kafka-Fragmente*, of the eighties) and op. 27 n. 1 (*...quasi una fantasia*, of the late eighties). These four works are diverse in instrumentation (op. 7 and op. 17 with vocals, not the second two; op. 7 and op. 24 with only two instruments, the others with a greater ensemble), diverse in structure (all of them are cycles of small pieces, except for op. 27, which is a complete work), diverse in

their compositional time (they span twenty years), diverse in compositional technique (the dodecaphonic in op. 7, abandoned in later works).

Opus 7 is a 40-minute song cycle for Soprano voice and piano, inspired by the sermons of the 16th century reform preacher Bornemisza: it is arranged in four parts (entitled “Confession”, “Sin”, “Death” and “Spring”).⁴ Here the composer makes use of melodic-rhythmic cells (especially one note repeat, second- or third-intervallic cells): these cells reveal themselves in elaborate polyphonies up to nine lines (in *Example 1a*), which thicken little by little completing the chord polarized in the register: it is a series of twelve notes, because op. 7 is a work of the first, dodecaphonic phase. This process takes place first whispering, then breaking out in a sforzato (on the word “God”), as the series is completed, then amplified and condensed in stains of chords ranging up and down a wide register. Elsewhere the completion of the register through the series occurs in a smaller extension in the beginning, generative part: the cell first creeps on chromatically, then suddenly invades the register during the piano part (*Example 1b*). Force and violence of gesture can show itself abruptly just at the beginning of a section through clusters directly set in disparate areas of the register, such as at the beginning of the third part of op. 7, “Death” (III, 1: *Example 1c*): from an initial “molto sostenuto” of opposing clusters of five notes, to the following “poco a poco più andante”, the register expands quite a lot and is filled inside through lively acciaccature; in the final “agitato” the filling breaks out in a forte and marcatissimo. In the same part (III, 4: *Example 1d*) animated gestures are the result of an only F that has been tinged with lurid light for the quick alternation of pianissimo and fortissimo in a space of a few seconds; the note F generates a strict polyphony up to 9 lines, then up to 12 lines (the complete series) expanded in the register. The light becomes iridescent with the addition of tremoli in pianissimo on the same note of the piano and of the voice’s non-intonated glissando on the very significant word “sufferings”: it is the triumph of gesture in music which, in its evolutions during the piece, follows biological rhythms, movements, colours and in a sense substitutes for traditional development (III, 4: Ex. 1d).

⁴ Can be useful to notice, that the following advanced parallels between musical techniques and natural processes have no parallel with the texts’ contents, when they concern Kurtág’s vocal works; this interpretation can be applied exclusively to compositional aspects, independent from the text, but verifiable also in vocals.

Molto concitato

ppp

(suttogvar Arremndr - whispered)

pp

Si dñe sa me-gre-dik réte hén kór der ceni vñt na.
 rñi an der Prr-dig ten mer an Tál eall de ga are.
 When I was grinc on the wrñ ing this Bónk rd jce more.

ci - maz - te - te - km Is - (a) ten
 rúp mir kom men der Jóbp - Lined - for
 lye ring me a scap. Lined - God

f *mf* *mp* *f* *mf* *f*

major seventh ————— 4 octave and a half

Example 1a

The ho - va in - kibb le - va - va le - va - va
 le ma - der ish a - ker hee - va - va le - va - va
 Much as I did try la - bour ing on

le - va - va in - kibb le - va - va
 der push them nom - guide, truck,

any - nyi - val in - kibb nô - va - va
 de - va - va ti - ger vavh rôn and nô - va - va
 all the quick - er they grew and grew

its
 and
 and

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Molto sostenuto

poco a poco più andante

agitato, giusto

marcatissimo

Example 1c

A last observation on op. 7 is that recognizable dodecaphonic or semi-dodecaphonic series condense in this score in recurrent motives: the motive of death, that of procession, that of sin, etc.; such as nature, which revives its elements in ever new forms.

The generative and gestural aspects of Kurtág's music can be found also in the second-mentioned work, op. 17 (*Messages of the Late R.V. Troussouva*), where they can be even referred to other compositional parameters: they are not only concerned with harmony and rhythm, but also with the use of various and suggestive instruments' timbres. First, the extreme articulation of voice is especially present in this score: gestures such as "whispering", "crying", "mewing" are the expressive extremes of a vocality which has in itself theatrical gestures; particularly the frequent, abrupt collapses to the deepest part of the soprano range vividly colour the fragmentary narration of a love affair (II, 1: *Example 2a*). Furthermore, the timbres of resonant instruments (mandolino, cymbalom, harp and various percussions, assembled in different ensembles from 1 to 15 instruments) add their own life to proliferating of cells. The iridescence of changing and resonant timbres fixed on the same harmony is much in evidence here: for example (I, 1: *Example 2b*) the soprano, the oboe, the clarinet, the horn, the piano and the cymbalom together play parts of the same chord, therefore amplifying the beginning cell of C-sharp-E of the viola and transposing it in various degrees. In this work we best understand the sense of free flowing nature by observing the aleatory sections too.

Ways of structuring not only isolated musical phrases, but of structuring the entire form can be observed in the last above-mentioned two works: op. 24 and op. 27, no. 1. Such ways will confirm the observation that the free flow of living organisms is always present. Opus 24 (*Kafka-Fragmente*) comprises 40 miniature movements for Soprano voice and violin and sets texts which refer to some pages of Kafka's diary: it is a long grouping of aphoristic pieces having each one its own musical autonomy in form. Here is the first fashion of the structuring of the forms by Kurtág: the short, aphoristic piece. The second fashion, the longer, more articulated forms, we will see further in ... *quasi una fantasia*...

In *Kafka-Fragmente* we can notice, besides the long, flowing ascending figures originating from generative cells, which remind us of lively freshness, a texture of long-range correspondences: recapitulation of motives, basses fixed to intervals throughout, ostinato-basses, forms which softly

Example 2b

perfect fifth G–D in a diminished fifth, but with an arpeggio: from stability to instability of harmony, such as articulation. To summarize, a small and essential drama is depicted here with extremely vivid colours at the beginning and in the repeat, while dissolving into a meaningful melody in the central part, where the soprano voice has a central role.

Mit Humor
Moderato, ben tenuto

Ein-mal brach ich mir das Bein, es war das

schön - ste Er - leb - nis mei - nes Le -

sempre *p*, assai ruvido

10 ad lib. mit Nagel
ad lib. with finger-nails
ad lib. körömmel

5th m.

Example 3

This deep sense of form, that expresses an inner drama through gestural articulations of beginning materials (almost always imperceptible events) is much more in evidence in longer, wider forms than *Kafka-Fragmente*: in op. 27 (...*quasi una fantasia*...) various instrumental groups are positioned in different areas on stage; in four movements (“Introduzione”, “Presto

minaccioso e lamentoso”, “Recitativo”, “Aria”) Kurtág develops a long formal bridge: from an initial softness, a diatonic melody of the piano coming out from nothing, through contrasting states of expressive violence and lyricism, sectioned by the subtle voice of harmonicas, the composer reaches at the end of the piece a sweet, somewhat ancient melody, one of the purest in the composer's production. The repeat of a melody (by the piano) in the final section of a piece is somewhat traditional, but entirely rethought in its eco-articulations “lontano, appena sentito” among piano and violin (*Example 4a*). From the second movement (“Presto minaccioso e lamentoso”) I have extracted some harmonic models, that are particularly recurrent in Kurtág's production: they are chords based on the leaps 3 (minor third), 8 (minor sixth), 13 (augmented octave) of the Fibonacci's series, which are ratios of golden section (the original piano's cell contains the smallest one, that widens furthermore in range) (*Example 4b*).

Thus a charming spectacle of nature in Kurtág's music is substantiated by a deep sense of history and tradition: Schütz's sacred polyphony and his canon architectures are sensed in op. 7 (the fugato with mirror canons of “Death”, III, 8), while the Italian 18th century aria in op. 27, no. 1 (last movement); Kurtág has reinvented Beethoven's instrumental recitative in the same work (onymous movement, where piano plays an intense recitative) and employs Bartók's axial harmony as well (in addition to the techniques of cluster-completing of intervals); Schönberg's dodecaphonic techniques are finally present in op. 7. It is an invisible breath of the past, that envelops nature's forms without smothering them but, quite the opposite, adding something familiar and known to such a personal expressive world; a world which, in my interpretation, somehow embodies and implies in its inner figural processes and formal conception nature's fine mechanisms of generation, transformation, life and death. The fragrance of free flow of the natural event is reproduced in Kurtág's music in its variety of figures, unceasingly irregular in articulation, whose generation and figural course can be quite precisely followed (and governed by technical strategies as has been observed before) and whose recurrent harmonic structures are partly referable to the ratios of the golden section, that is nature's geometry. This last topic, however, we hope will be more systematically developed in future studies.

...Es nehmet aber
Und gebt Gedächtnis die See,
Und die Lieb auch heftet fleißig die Augen,
Was bleibt aber ...

Lontano, calmo, appena sentito

Pf $1=3+3+2$ $4+3+3+1$ $2/4$ $5/4$

*Con pedale
sul corda*

**Piatti
e sospesi**

Ganghi *(falso)* *(falso)*

Vibr *con pedale*

Cimb *con pedale*

Arpa *lento*

$1=3+3+1$ $1+3+3+1$ $2/4$ $4/4$

**Blackflöte
(sempre laca)** *vibrato molto e lento
(Tenore)*

**Cr
(Fa)** *con corda* *vibrato molto e lento*

Vi. I *con corda*

Vi. II *con corda*

Vla *con corda*

Vlc *con corda*

Cb *con corda* *lento* $1=3+3+1$ $2/4$ $4/4$ $6+6$

Example 4a

II Presto minaccioso e lamentoso
Molto agitato, sempre pppp

minor 3°

augmented 8°

A (lamentoso)

sempre febbrile

augmented 8°

minor 6°

Example 4b