

Communication and Experience: Some Observations on the Relationship between Composer and Performer in *Játékok*

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The focus of this paper is the extraordinary ‘Hommage à Tchaikovsky’ from Book 1 of Kurtág’s *Játékok*. In this work, many of the disparate aspects which I consider central to an understanding of *Játékok* are brought together in the one piece, but here I shall concentrate on Kurtág’s use of an irrational notation and the implications which this carries for such an explicitly referential work and the performer’s interpretation of it. One obvious point needs restating at the start. This is that a composer’s notation, the actual symbols he commits to paper are the only means he has of communicating his desires to his performers. In Kurtág’s piece here, as with much of his music, what he wishes to communicate is something very personal, very specific and often externally referential, and his choice of an irrational notation to communicate this delicately complex meaning has certain ramifications which I will begin to explore (*Example 1*).

The piece itself is a somewhat satirical parody of the famous opening of Tchaikovsky’s *First Piano Concerto*, and unusually the ‘homage’ of the title is perhaps double-edged. Just glancing at the score, it is clear what Kurtág has done technically: the strident chords of Tchaikovsky’s opening piano part have been replaced by two-handed fist strikes, and the device is simple enough, in conjunction with the title, to make the reference to a famous work apparent. The piece even includes a *D. C. al fine* indication, so that it is, superficially at least, in the same tripartite form as Tchaikovsky’s music. The opening section of the Tchaikovsky, the section on which Kurtág’s piece is based, forms an A–B–A shape, with the famous theme and piano accompaniment featuring in the two A sections, and the central B section consisting largely of an extended piano cadenza, which Kurtág also mimics here, although less closely, in his own central section. And in a good performance of

The image displays a musical score for 'Landschaft' by György Kurtág. It is divided into two columns: the left column shows the piano part and the right column shows the violin part. The piano part consists of three systems of staves, each with a treble and bass clef. The notation is highly graphic, featuring numerous black dots representing clusters of notes. Some clusters are enclosed in hand-drawn, irregular shapes. The violin part also consists of three systems, with notes and slurs indicating melodic lines. The score includes various performance markings such as 'ff', 'rit.', and 'D.C. al Fine'.

Example 1: 'Hommage à Tchaikovsky.' *Játékok*, Book 1

the work it is hard not to at least half-imagine Tchaikovsky's bold orchestral theme soaring over the top of the piano part as it does in the original. What is remarkable is that this can be achieved from what in the score appears at first glance to be highly indeterminate with respect to performance. No time signature is given, no tempo marking shown (other than 'vigorously'), and Kurtág's semi-free rhythmic notation indicates that all the notes of the piece are to be played at only approximately even durations; but with virtually no indication as to what that duration might be since there is very little with which to compare it. Pitches are unspecified, since the fist or palms are to be used, although it is indicated that both black and white notes are to be played at once, resulting in chromatic clusters of indeterminate size and pitch. Although one could read the score in enough detail to make more-or-less precise determinations about what actual cluster group Kurtág is implying – the second attack, for example, seems to be a chromatic cluster across an octave from G to G – the deliberately hand-drawn blobs seem to be more suggestive than prescriptive, and should not be interpreted too literally. Register, however, is fairly precisely indicated, as can be seen in the final bars of the first page, in which six distinctly-placed clusters in each hand are to be played.

Already one can see the crucial paradox within the piece – which extends to many other works in Kurtág's output – that very specific materials are used as the basis for a work – in this case quotation from the identifiable

work of another composer – but these are described to the performer in what appears to be a very imprecise notation. Without the reference to Tchaikovsky in the title here, it would be very easy for less sensitive performers to conjure quite a range of very different interpretations of the notation: superficially the score doesn't look vastly different in intent from one of Morton Feldman's early indeterminate works, for example. But yet Kurtág wants us to play this indeterminate notation so that it sounds like a Tchaikovsky piano concerto. It is such a fact as this that sets Kurtág's indeterminate notation apart from that of more experimental composers: for Kurtág the notation is still a conduit for a very specific musical expression, just as conventional notation is. It is still expected to support a traditionally recognisable semantic code, for example; it is expected to refer to musical objects beyond the piece itself, which the abstracted notations of Feldman, Cage, Earle Brown and others set out categorically to negate. There is no suggestion of a Cageian aesthetic here of removing the composer's authorial presence within the work through the use of an indeterminate notation. On the contrary – Kurtág's music is marked throughout with an intensely personal, almost autobiographical inspiration. The vast network of homages to friends and colleagues, coded messages and memorials throughout *Játékok* alone bring the personality of the composer into the centre of the music, rather than suggesting that he should somehow be absent from it. And with the composer's personality so visibly central to his work, it is inevitable that we should find in it a desire to communicate his intensely personal experiences of music and performance.

So what exactly is it that Kurtág has left us with? How can we possibly evaluate such a work? This is a work in which the composer clearly desires to make his voice felt, but he has also removed most of the precision of that voice's articulation in his score. Could, for example, any notation in the right performer's hands be made to sound like Tchaikovsky, and in which case what has Kurtág himself actually contributed here? Why should this piece demand an analytical evaluation such as I am proposing at all when works such as Feldman's *Projections* demand an evaluation of a rather more abstract aesthetic concept, a step removed from the score itself, whereas with Kurtág we are still looking at the notes that are on the page. I think this last question at least can be easily answered by the fact that 'Hommage à Tchaikovsky' contains an explicit referential element which gives it a supporting framework of musical codes which are in turn exploited and played upon. It

is the relationship between the framework and the end product which is revealing and which illuminates other aspects of Kurtág's music.

Returning to the score, it is not easily reducible to any standard analytical 'grid' of pitch relationships and durations, since these aspects of the music are not determined. Clearly we must look beyond standard Western analytical techniques, which rely on systematising aspects of pitch and/or rhythm. None of them apply here, even though paradoxically the subject matter of the piece is deeply involved with the Western canon: it borrows its models, quotes from it and deconstructs it to something which – although recognisably itself – contains none of the traditionally quantifiable elements of itself. The rich D flat major chords of Tchaikovsky's work are reduced to aleatory fist thumping, and the strict waltz rhythm is only loosely implied yet in the absence of pitch and rhythmic definition something still remains of the original. Therefore it must be other aspects that are brought to the fore. These are a certain spiritual dimension and a physical, gestural dimension. A very great deal has been talked about music as an experience of pitch, or especially as an experience of time, but Kurtág is here foregrounding it as a physical experience, an experience of touch and movement.

Through examining the content of *Játékok* as a whole, it is clear the importance Kurtág attaches to the communication of music as a physical experience. A clear example of this can be found at the start of the set in the pair of pieces titled 'Wrong Notes Allowed' (*Example 2*).

These pieces are from the opening of what is after all a loosely progressive teaching manual, and so are intended for the absolute beginner. Although the pitches are notated in this case, the title hints that these are only suggestions, or goals to be aimed for. In the hands of the beginner it is likely that wrong notes will intrude as he or she negotiates the very wide leaps of the score. However, although pitch discrepancies are allowed, from the way the music has been scored for left and right hands it would appear that attention must be given to the use of crossed arms up and down the keyboard. From the very start of *Játékok*, Kurtág has made it plain that, in the hierarchy of learning, precedence is to be given to the physical gesture and the manner of performance over the audible result. The player should feel the arcs described by the notation almost before sounding the pitches correctly.

In another work, again from Book 1 of the set, Kurtág goes still further in his emphasis on the physical nature of a musical work over its conventionally analysible aural content. The work 'Dumb Show' is a short piece, writ-

Melléütni szabad (1)

Danebenhauen ist erlaubt (1) Wrong Notes Allowed (1)

The musical score for 'Melléütni szabad (1)' is presented in two systems. The first system is marked '(con moto)' and 'f'. It features a treble and bass staff with various notes and rests. A dashed line labeled 'smile' connects a note in the treble staff to a note in the bass staff. The second system is marked 'p dolce' and 'mp ff'. It continues the musical notation with a similar dashed line and a bracketed section containing a note.

Melléütni szabad (2)

Danebenhauen ist erlaubt (2) Wrong Notes Allowed (2)

The musical score for 'Melléütni szabad (2)' is presented in two systems. The first system is marked '(Scherzando)' and 'mf'. It features a treble and bass staff with various notes and rests. The second system is marked 'ff' and 'mp'. It continues the musical notation with a similar dashed line and a bracketed section containing a note. The number '2. 8177' is printed at the bottom of the second system.

Example 2: 'Wrong Notes Allowed' nos. 1 and 2, *Játékok*, Book 1

ten in full notation, with a number of subtly distinct demands being made on the player regarding rhythm, attack and mode of performance. However, the catch is to be found in the footnote instruction to 'touch the surfaces of the keys very lightly, without moving any of them'. In other words, the piece is a carefully composed and fully notated silence. However, although the piece is silent, it is far from empty of content – this is a very different work from Cage's *4'33''*. Kurtág has still presented a score in which a discernible musi-

cal form may be read and which demands an active interpretation from a performer. In performance attention is still focused on what the composer has created and how the pianist manifests and interprets this, just as in a conventional piece of music. The only difference is that instead of asking the performer to produce sounds which are loud, soft, high or low, Kurtág is asking for sounds that are merely inaudible. There is a notion, which lies at the centre of 'Hommage à Tchaikovsky', that Kurtág is composing that which is just about communicable (*Example 3*).

Molto agitato

ff

pp

(Small text at the bottom of the score, likely a copyright notice or publisher information, is mostly illegible due to the image quality.)

Example 3: 'Dumb Show,' Játékok, Book 1

Kurtág is writing music that explores that area between what is playable and what can be communicated to an audience. It is this subtle distinction which makes *Játékok* such a success for both groups for which it is intended. The student pianist can grapple with the technical demands of the pieces and learn to play them to himself, but the professional is required to do more, and translate the apparently inaudible, impossible or incommunicable into something for a listening (and viewing) audience to enjoy. Playing thumping clusters with your fists whilst singing Tchaikovsky in your head is one thing, and quite within the grasp of the average piano pupil; it requires a quantum leap of musicianship, however, to make Tchaikovsky sing in your audience's minds whilst you play with your palms and fists.

The emphasis on certain physical dimensions of performance – the part of the hand which is to play a cluster, rather than the actual pitch content of that cluster, the flamboyant crossing of arms, the negation of sound from a work but the retention of its physical performance – all these things which we can see operating in *Játékok* force the performer and reader of Kurtág's music to think, hear and see beyond the notated mechanics of what they are playing, and to make associations between certain physical gestures and mental processes, and musical communication. You are not playing dissonant clusters with your fists, you are playing Tchaikovsky; you are not waving your arms silently, you are communicating to your audience a glissando which crescendos from bass to treble registers. By making these very distinct and often complex demands on his performers in the absence of any great detail in the score itself Kurtág is altering the causal relationship between composer, performer and audience. Although Kurtág himself has a very precise idea of what he wishes to communicate, and thus how the music should sound to his audience, he leaves a large part of the responsibility for achieving this in the hands of the performer. Thus, in the three-part chain of musical production and reception, the part of the performer is brought very much to the fore as a creator, far more so than in traditionally notated music, without being granted any of the freedoms of improvisation or experiment. And further, many of the instructions which do remain for the performer are so closely connected to the corporeal production of the music that they only contain any real significance for the person actually playing the piece. Their effect is largely lost on a listening audience (particularly if the audience is not present at an actual live performance of the music). What we have therefore, and this is an outcome which is thoroughly appropriate for the conception of these works in *Játékok* as teaching aids, is that performers are given special access to parts of the piece: they are given a very great creative responsibility in the work's creation – more so than exists in the more mechanical reproduction of a precisely-notated score – and are granted an exclusive access to many of the score's physical demands which cannot be experienced as directly by an audience. In music such as this, in which all formulaic placings of pitch and duration which a conventionally notated score encourages have been erased, we are left as performers and pupils to contemplate music's naked essence. Kurtág demands that we consider this, learn it and treasure it.