

# The Genealogy of György Kurtág's *Hommage à R. Sch*, op.15d\*

Friedemann SALLIS  
Université de Moncton  
Canada

*Musique qui les chants forge  
En la vieille et nouvelle forge.*  
Guillaume de Machaut

## Introduction

The title was inspired by a recent observation made by Herbert Lindenberger.

Aesthetic genealogies are the reverse of family genealogies. Whereas the latter move forward from a few common ancestors to the diverse progeny they have spawned, the former progress backward from a singular entity labelled a work of art to a multitude of earlier works that, however little their creators may have recognized their mutual affinities, come to resemble a family that the later member has retrospectively begotten, defined, legitimated.<sup>1</sup>

The remark is part of a comparative study of Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses und Aaron* and Kurt Weill's *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* and it is quite striking how well it applies to György Kurtág's *Hommage à R. Sch*, op. 15d for clarinet (also bass drum), viola and piano. Like each of the operas, this trio also creates a network of relationships, reaching back into time and bringing together the work of both poets and composers.

The composition is made up of six movements, the first five of which are short fragments. The last is a longer piece, contrasting starkly with the fleeting, ephemeral nature of the preceding movements. Work on this composition spanned a period of fifteen years. Dates in the printed score indicate that the first and sixth movements were initially sketched between 1975 and 1979, while the remaining movements were written between 1985 and 1990. *Hommage à R. Sch* was given its first performance in Budapest on October 8, 1990. The six movements of this work are entitled as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera in History. From Monteverdi to Cage*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998, p. 209.

1. (*merkwürdige Pirouetten des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler*) [the marvelous pirouettes of the conductor Johannes Kreisler] *Vivo* (1975–77/1986–90). The title evokes both the principal character of E. T. A. Hoffmann's story, *Johannes Kreisler, des Kapellmeisters musikalische Leiden* and the title of Wilhelm Wackenroder's *Das merkwürdige musikalische Leben des Tonkünstlers Joseph Berlinger*.

2. (*E.: der begrenzte Kreis...*) [Eusebius: the closed circle ...] *Molto semplice, piano e legato* (1986–90). The music of this movement is based on a piece from the *Kafka-Fragmente* (op. 24). For op. 15d Kurtág added a piano part to the original duo for soprano and violin. The text fragment (...der begrenzte Kreis ist Rein...) was taken from a paragraph in Franz Kafka's *Tagebücher*.<sup>2</sup>

3. (...und wieder zuckt es schmerzlich F. um die Lippen...) [...and again Florestan's lips quiver painfully...] *Feroce, agitato* (1989–90). The title refers to the ninth piece of the *Davidsbündlertänze* (op. 6), where we read, "Hierauf schloß Florestan und es zuckte ihm schmerzlich um die Lippen".

4. (*Felhő valék, már süt a nap...*) (*töredék-töredék*) [(I was a cloud, now the sun shines...) (fragment-fragment)] *Calmo, scorrevole* (1985–86). This movement corresponds to the second in that the music is an adaptation of a previously composed piece, "Felhő valék, már süt a nap..." for piano solo, written in 1983. A draft of the original version for piano solo is conserved in the György Kurtág Collection of the Paul Sacher Foundation. To this day, the piano piece remains unpublished. The title is a text fragment taken from a poem by Attila József entitled *Dal* [Song] (1928).<sup>3</sup>

5. *In der Nacht* [In the Night] *Presto* (1986/1990). The sixth piece of *Fantasiestücke* op. 12 for piano bears the same title.

6. *Abschied (Meister Raro entdeckt Guillaume de Machaut)* [Farewell (Master Raro discovers Guillaume de Machaut)] *Adagio, poco andante* (1978–79/90). 'Abschied' also happens to be the title of the last piece of *Waldscenen* (op. 82).

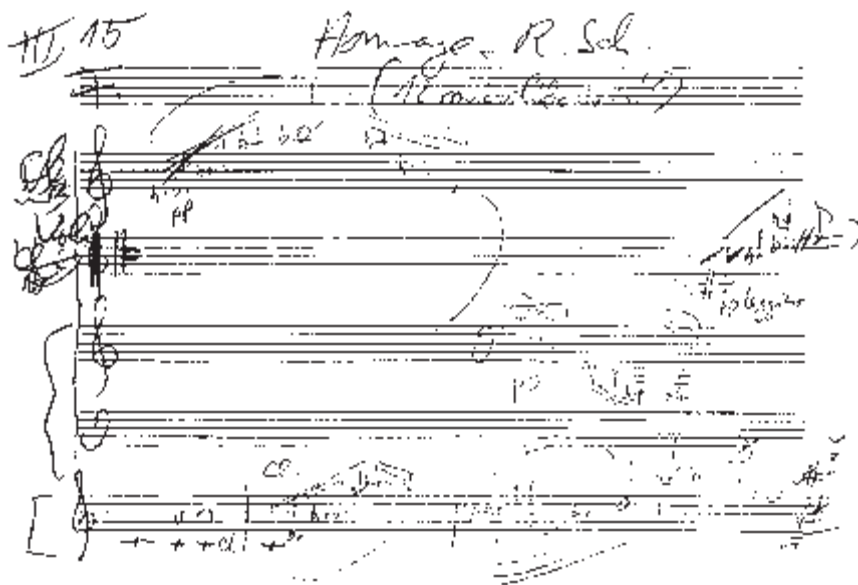
As well as references to the legendary characters of Schumann's musical fantasy, the score contains direct allusions to his music. In one of his rare work commentaries, Kurtág has stated that the fifth movement, 'In der Nacht,' is filled with "Schumann'schen Zügen" (Schumann-like gestures) taken from

<sup>2</sup> Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher 1910–1923*, ed. Max Brod, Frankfurt a. M: Fischer 1967, p. 229.

<sup>3</sup> A French translation of this poem entitled 'Chanson' is published in *Anthologie de la poésie hongroise. Du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle à nos jours*, ed. Ladislav Gara, Paris: Seuil 1962, p. 339.

the *Fantasiestücke* (op. 73) for clarinet and piano.<sup>4</sup> The music also clearly evokes the romantic turbulence of its namesake in the *Fantasiestücke* (op. 12). Be this as it may, *Hommage à R. Sch.* is much more than what one short-sighted reviewer once called, this ingenious second-hand appropriation (“genialer Secondhand-Verwertung”) of *Kreisleriana*.

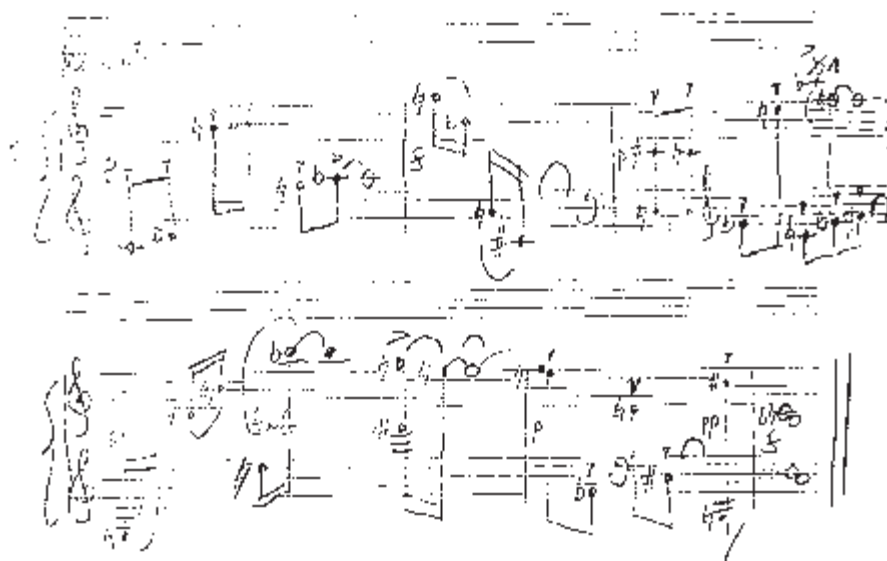
An examination of source material conserved at the Paul Sacher Foundation reveals a network of relationships, linking *Hommage à R. Sch.* not only with the work of other composers and poets, but also with works and work projects from within Kurtág's own oeuvre, creating layers of significance, which cannot necessarily be apprehended from a study of the score alone. For instance, the first movement appears to be an outgrowth of work on *Játékok* and left its mark in volume two of that series. In a sketchbook containing primarily sketches and drafts for pieces that would make up the first four volumes of the *Játékok* series, we find the earliest known sketch of ‘merkwürdige Pirouetten des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler’ dated March 15 [1975] (*Example 1*).



*Example 1: Hommage à R. Sch.*, ‘merkwürdige Pirouetten des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler,’ sketch, György Kurtág Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel, reprinted with permission of the Foundation

<sup>4</sup> György Kurtág, ‘*Hommage à R. Sch.* op. 15d,’ in *Ligeti und Kurtág in Salzburg*, ed. Ulrich Dibelius, Zürich: Residenz Verlag 1993, p. 85.

On the following page we find an early draft of ‘settenkedés-rajtaütés’ [slip-slop] dated March 19 [1975], a modified version of which would later be published in *Játékok II*. Notice how the melodic gesture at the beginning of this piano piece conforms with the initial pitch structure in the sketch of ‘merkwürdige Pirouetten des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler’ (Example 2).



Example 2: *Játékok II*, ‘settenkedés-rajtaütés,’ early draft, György Kurtág Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel, reprinted with permission of the Foundation

In order to examine some of the breadth and depth of this network of relationships and to begin to assess its significance for the work as a whole, I would like to concentrate on the last movement.

**‘Abschied (Meister Raro entdeckt Guillaume de Machaut)’:  
paraphrase, pastiche, parody...?**

What are we to make of the explicit reference to Guillaume de Machaut in the title of the last movement of Kurtág’s *Hommage à R. Sch?* To begin with, the composer has had an abiding interest in the music of the 14th-century French master since at least the mid-1970s. Material evidence for this first appears in a sketch of an unfinished arrangement for recorder, voice, trombone and percussion of Machaut’s virelai, *C’est force faire le weil*. Since

then Kurtág has gone on to publish arrangements for piano four-hands of all four sections of the 'Kyrie' from the *Messe de Notre Dame* and the rondeau *Doulz viaire gracieus*.<sup>5</sup>

Though the last movement of op. 15d does not appear to be specifically related to any particular work by Machaut, the organisation of both pitch and duration does allude to isorhythmic technique. The first eight bars of the piano part, which constitute approximately one third of the movement, are based on a repeated rhythmic figure (*Example 3*).



*Example 3: Hommage à R. Sch.*, 'Abschied (Meister Raro entdeckt Guillaume de Machaut),' rhythmic figure of the piano part of bars 1–8

Whereas the rhythmic figure is repeated exactly, once in each of the first eight bars, the pitch content changes continuously, evoking relationships of continuity and variety which do characterise the *talea* and *color* in 14th-century isorhythmic structures. Indeed exact rhythmic repetition combined with diastematic variation constitute one of the basic compositional techniques employed at the beginning of this movement. Notice how the clarinet and viola parts are also organised in two-bar groups of repeated rhythmic figures, while the pitch content changes continuously (*Example 4*).

Curiously, despite these allusions, specific reference to Machaut in the title of the sixth movement seems to have come rather late in the creative process. As well, sketch material housed at the Sacher Foundation shows that the music which would become 'Abschied (Meister Raro entdeckt Guillaume de Machaut)' was in fact composed long before this particular title had been envisioned. During 1976, Kurtág worked on an unfinished piece for trombone and piano entitled *Nagy Sirató* [Great Lament].<sup>6</sup> The sketches of this project are included in two sketchbooks conserved at the Paul Sacher Foundation. As can be seen in the following examples, they correspond extraordinarily well with the last movement of *Hommage à R. Sch.* Though

<sup>5</sup> These arrangements have been published in György Kurtág, *Átiratok Machaut-tól J. S. Bachig zongorára (négy és hat kézre) és két zongorára* [Transcriptions from Machaut to J. S. Bach for piano (four and six hands) and for two pianos], Budapest: Editio Musica 1991, pp. 4–13.

<sup>6</sup> *Nagy Sirató* is part of a considerable number of chamber works written during the 1970s for trombone and various instruments. Indeed one unpublished work bears the descriptive title *Posaunos kamarazenék* [Trombone Chamber Music] (for trombone, violin and cello), composed in 1975. To date the only work to have been published from this activity is *A kis csáva* for piccolo, trombone and guitar op. 15b, composed in 1978. For detailed information concerning this aspect of Kurtág's work, see the inventory of Kurtág's manuscripts conserved at the Paul Sacher Foundation. F: Sallis and Chr. Dreier, *György Kurtág Musikmanuskripte*, Mainz: Schott, forthcoming.

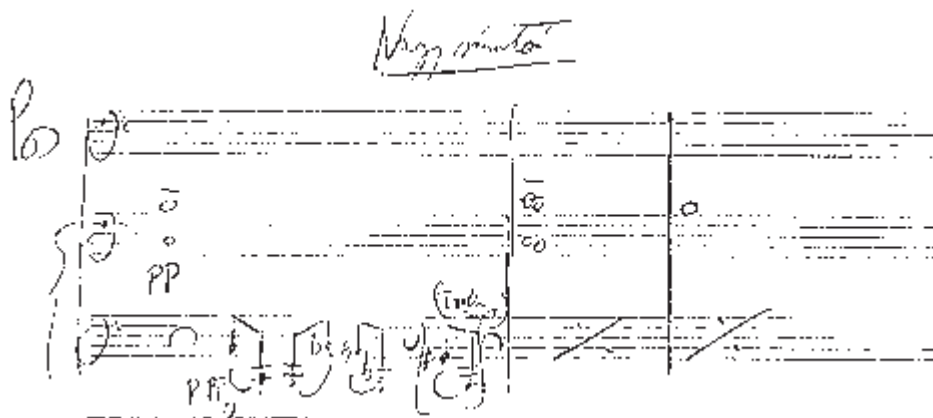
Adagio, poco andante

Allegro, molto più mosso

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Example 4: *Hommage à R. Sch.*, 'Abschied (Meister Raro entdeckt Guillaume de Machaut)', bars 1–8, reprinted with permission of Editio Musica Budapest

very brief, the first, early sketch in the following example contains three elements, which will appear as such in the sixth movement of op. 15d: the rhythmic figure of six eighth-notes; the major seventh preceding the rhythmic figure; the minor seconds in parallel octaves following it (*Example 5*).



*Example 5: Nagy Sirató* for trombone and piano, sketches, György Kurtág Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel, reprinted with permission of the Foundation

The next example shows a more elaborate version of *Nagy Sirató*. The piano part has now taken the metrico-rhythmic shape it will retain in *Hommage à R. Sch.* Also, the slow chromatic movement in the trombone part clearly foreshadows similar movement in the clarinet and viola parts of op. 15d (*Example 6*).

Approximately two years later, Kurtág took the music that had initially been intended for trombone and piano, and used it as the basis for the sixth and final movement of the first, rejected version of *Grabstein für Stephan*, composed in 1978–79.<sup>7</sup> The piano part of this eight-bar movement conforms extraordinarily well with the piano part of the first eight bars of the sixth movement of *Hommage à R. Sch.*, except for one detail. Bars 7–8 of the piano part in *Grabstein für Stephan* (1978–79) become bars 3–4 in *Hommage à R. Sch.*<sup>8</sup> (*Example 7*).

<sup>7</sup> In 1989 Kurtág completed an entirely new version of this work, which now appears in his work list as *Grabstein für Stephan*, op. 15c for guitar and groups of instruments.

<sup>8</sup> This relationship between the piano parts of *Grabstein für Stephan* (1978–1979) and *Hommage à R. Sch.* was uncovered only days before presenting this paper at the Földvári Napok on June 22, 2001. I am grateful to my assistant, Mylène Ouellette, for having pointed out the apparently anomalous pitch organisation in bars 1–6 of the piano part of the last movement of op. 15d long before I had the opportunity to study the draft of sixth movement of *Grabstein für Stephan* (1978–79).





Example 6: *Nagy Sirató* for trombone and piano, sketches, György Kurtág Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel, reprinted with the permission of the Foundation

‘Sirató’ means lament and refers to the Hungarian version of the age-old, oral tradition of expressing bereavement through song.<sup>9</sup> The recycling of this music from *Nagy Sirató* to *Grabstein für Stephan* (1978–79) surely underscores its relationship to death and mourning. I will leave to the experts in ethnomusicology the fascinating question of whether and to what

<sup>9</sup> Secondary literature on the Hungarian lament tradition is particularly rich. See for instance, Zoltán Kodály, *A magyar népzene*, Budapest: 1937, English trans. 1960; eds. Lajos Kiss and Benjamin Rajeczky, *Siratók*, Corpus musicae popularis hungaricae, vol. 5, Budapest: 1966.



The image displays two systems of handwritten musical notation. The left system is marked with a Roman numeral 'VII' and a measure number '1-'. It features a variety of staves, including a grand staff with piano and harp parts, and individual staves for other instruments. The notation includes complex rhythmic patterns, accidentals, and dynamic markings such as 'ppp' (pianissimo) and 'f' (forte). The right system continues the musical piece, showing further development of the themes and textures. The handwriting is fluid and characteristic of a composer's draft.

Example 7: *Grabstein für Stephan* for alto flute, trombone, guitar, harp and piano (1978–79), sixth movement, draft, György Kurtág Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel, reprinted with the permission of the Foundation

extent the last movement of *Hommage à R. Sch* corresponds to the various types of music used in the mourning of the dead. I would observe however that the slow tempo, the low register (at least in the piano), the predominantly chromatic pitch organisation and the heavily repetitive nature of the rhythmic structure all conform to what we often associate with this type of music. Furthermore, these are characteristics generally shared by other pieces by Kurtág entitled 'Sirató' (see for instance the various pieces and versions of pieces for piano and two pianos bearing this title in *Játékok III, IV* and *VIII*).

That the last movement, entitled 'Abschied', of a work dedicated to the memory of Schumann should bring with it connotations of death and mourning is hardly surprising. We are however still left wondering what the relationship is between this music and its title in op. 15d. If the organisation of duration and pitch in this movement does allude to the compositional technique of *Ars nova*, the rhythmic figure of example 2 is not a *talea* and the movement's structure cannot be described as *isorhythmic*. In bars 9–10, Kurtág begins manipulating the rhythmic figure by foreshortening it by one beat and in the following section (bars 11–14) he rearranges its constituent elements.

Thus the type of relationship which can be established between this movement and the music of Machaut is at best indirect and has been described by none other than Robert Schumann himself. In the guise of *Meister Raro*, he wrote the following in one of his 'Davidsbündler' articles

...ich bin übrigens kein Anbeter des allzu Antiken; im Gegenteil laß ich diese antediluvianischen Untersuchungen wohl als historische Liebhaberei gelten, halte sie aber für wenig einflußreich auf unsere Kunstbildung. Ihr wißt aber auch, wie nachdrücklich ich euch zum Studium der Alten angehalten. Denn wie der Malermeister seinen Schüler nach Herkulanum schickt, nicht daß er jeden einzelnen Torso zeichne, sondern daß er erstarke an der Haltung und Würde des Ganzen, es auf echten Boden anschau, genieße, nachbilde, so leitete auch ich euch in dem Sinne, nicht daß ihr über jedes einzelne jedes einzelnen in ein gelehrtes Staunen geraten möchtet, sondern die nun erweiterten Kunstmittel auf ihre Prinzipien zurückführen und deren besonnene Anwendung auffinden lernt.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> "I am no devotee of the antique; on the contrary, I tend to think of this antediluvian research as so much historical dilettantism, and in my opinion it has little influence on our artistic culture. You also know, however, how emphatically I have encouraged you to study the ancients. The master painter sends his students to Herculaneum, not to sketch every torso, but to gain strength from the bearing and the dignity of it as a whole, and to observe, enjoy and imitate art works in their authentic environment. In the same way, I have encouraged in you that attitude, not that you might muster erudite astonishment at every minute detail, but that you might learn to trace the expanded artistic means of today back to their sources, and to discover how they can be intelligently employed." Robert Schumann, 'Leipziger Musikleben. Zweiter Artikel,' in *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker II*, ed. Martin Kreisig, 5th edition, Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel 1914, pp. 269–270.

### The Music of Machaut and Formal Coherence in *Hommage à R. Sch*

If then, the relationship between *Abschied* and compositional technique of the 14th century is allusive and at best indirect, I would nevertheless like to make one last point concerning the music of Machaut and *Hommage à R. Sch.* It may well be that the title of the last movement has more to say about the work as a whole than either the content or the structure of its final movement. In his study of Machaut's *Messe de Nostre Dame*, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson acknowledges that we do not know whether this mass was conceived and composed as a whole within a relatively short period of time or whether it was assembled long after the individual movements had been separately composed. In the wake of his detailed analysis, Leech-Wilkinson leans toward the former position. However, he insists that even if we believe that the mass was assembled after the fact, it nevertheless achieves a remarkable degree of coherence. This coherence is however not of a modern sort, in which a master plan dictates every structural aspect. On the contrary, it is to be found in

the use of similar melodic shapes and progressions underlying the constituent phrases of every movement. It is coherence of technique and – most importantly – of style.<sup>11</sup>

I believe it is at this level that the music of Machaut and Kurtág's *Hommage à R. Sch.* intersect most fruitfully. To paraphrase Judit Frigyesi, Kurtág, like Bartók before him, has that uncanny ability to bring together a highly individual choice of elements into a coherent personal style.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the title's reference to both Schumann and Machaut is not arbitrary. It was after all the young Romantics of the early 19th century who first pointed to the necessity of examining the artistic legacy, not only of the recent, but also of the remote past. Eugenie Schumann cites the following statement from her father's diary

For a long time I have had in mind, together with Clara, looking more at older music (before Bach's time). About old Italians and Netherlanders, even Germans, we know but little. And really it is so necessary that an artist be able to account for himself before the whole history of his art.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, *Machaut's Mass: An Introduction*, Oxford: Clarendon 1990, p. 90

<sup>12</sup> Judit Frigyesi, *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1998, p. 119

<sup>13</sup> Schumann quoted in Thomas Brown, *The Aesthetics of Robert Schumann*, New York: Philosophical Library 1968, p. 77.

It was also those same young Romantics who invented the idea that a series of short pieces, related neither by function nor structure, can be brought together stylistically. The question which arises time and again is, how they come to form whole works. Masterpieces such as *Hommage à R. Sch* challenge us once again to look at these unresolved questions.