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

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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.¹

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:


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.²

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…) (töredéktöredék) [(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).³


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

the Fantasiestücke (op. 73) for clarinet and piano. 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

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 ‘merk-würdige Pirouetten des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler’ (Example 2).

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*.\(^5\)

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*).

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 Sírató* [Great Lament].\(^6\) The sketches of this project are included in two sketchbooks conserved at the Paul Sacher Foundation.

\(^{5}\) 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.

\(^{6}\) *Nagy Sírató* 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 *Posztonos kamarazenét* [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.
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. 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 (Example 7).

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.

This relationship between the piano parts of Grabstein für Stephan (1978–79) 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).
‘Sirató’ means lament and refers to the Hungarian version of the age-old, oral tradition of expressing bereavement through song. 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

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

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.\(^{11}\)

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.\(^{12}\)

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.\(^{13}\)

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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.