

The Structure of What is Beyond the Words: Musico-Poetic Analysis of the Fragment from *Scenes from a Novel*, op.19 by György Kurtág*

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It is a well-known fact that literature, and specifically poetry, is the constant source of Kurtág's inspiration. It is also a fact that vocal compositions dominate his oeuvre. Starting with his op. 16, *Ommagio a Luigi Nono* for a capella choir (1980), a large number of Kurtág's vocal works are settings to texts by Russian 19th- and 20th-century poets. As a native Russian speaker, I can testify that it is very difficult to imagine more congenial musical realisation of the poems used by Kurtág than his compositions. When getting into the sound-word relationships in Kurtág's pieces, the difficulty of the task lies in the necessity of looking at the very source of the composer's inspiration – the poems themselves – as closely and methodically, as their musical execution. It is important to remember that each poem, just like a piece of music, is a structural entity with its own means of continuity. My approach to Kurtág's vocal music is based on the premise that there is always a close relationship between poetic and music structures in every vocal composition, and that this relationship could be one of structural equivalence or non-equivalence, which may produce tension between the two counterparts.

My specific focus is Kurtág's *Scenes from a Novel*, op. 19 (1979–82), a musical setting of poems by Rimma Dalos. This vocal cycle for soprano and instrumental trio (violin, cimbalom and double bass) consists of fifteen short fragments. I focus on only one fragment from this composition, no. 13 entitled 'Visit'. In a sense following Kurtág's compositional process, I will examine Dalos's poem used in this fragment. I will utilise the approach of structuralist poetic analysis of the Russian semiotician Iurii Lotman.¹ Ac-

* Present paper is fully based on the material of my dissertation: *Playing with circles: A musico-poetic study of György Kurtág's Scenes from a Novel*, op. 19 (1979–82).

¹ Iurii Lotman, *Analiz Poeticheskogo Teksta*, Leningrad: Prosveshchenie 1972; Iurii Lotman, *Analysis of the Poetic Text*, ed. and trans. by D. Barton Johnson, Ann Arbor: Ardis 1976.

According to Lotman, poetry is the most semantically charged of all means of verbal communication. One of the distinctive features of poetic language is “a high information content... coupled with a low economy of means.”² My structuralist approach, which follows Lotman’s principles, considers the grammatical, lexical (concerning word content), phonological (sound content), prosodic (metric organisation), and graphic (page layout) levels of poetic structure. Lotman states that in each separate poetic unit one or several structural levels may dominate over others. The main postulate of Lotman’s analytical system is that “in a poetic text all the elements are mutually correlated... consequently, they are semantically loaded. Artistic structure manifests itself on all levels.”³

After my text analysis, I will concentrate on the musical analysis of this fragment. In my approach I examine both the vertical and horizontal aspects of the piece. In the last part, basing my conclusions on the separate poetic and musical analysis of ‘Visit,’ I will show that the poetic structure may give us an understanding of musical processes present in the music; conversely, Kurtág’s music may ‘explain’ Dalos’s poetry better than any verbal interpretation.

I. Text

For analytical purposes I am suggesting a literal, word-by-word English translation of this poem (*Figure 1*).

Transliterated Russian text	Word-by-word English translation
V belom kholode snega-pokrova prishla ko mne gost'is-toska.	In a white chill of a snow-blanket [came to me a guest]-sorrow.

Figure 1: Scenes from a Novel to poems by Rimma Dalos, op. 19, no. 13, ‘Visit’
Transliterated Russian text and word-by-word English translation

Since the original order of the words is absolutely critical for the analysis, the phrase “came to me a guest,” which does not make much sense in English, is put in brackets. The originality of this poem by Rimma Dalos comes, first of all, from its format, which resembles Japanese haiku. Actually, this is one of six haikuesque poems present in *Scenes from a Novel*. But this poem is primarily interesting for its use of enjambment, or ‘run-on-line.’ Barry P. Scherr explains the term ‘enjambment’ as follows: “Normally the end of the verse is accompanied by a syntactic break – the end of a sentence, clause, or

² Irena R. Makaryk, general ed. and compl., *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1993, p. 209.

³ I. Lotman, *Analysis of the Poetic Text*, p. 72.

phrase. In the case of enjambment, the significant break occurs within the line rather than at the end.”⁴ In the first case of enjambment in the Dalos poem, the words “snow” and “blanket,” constituting one semantic unit “snow-blanket,” are separated by the internal prosodic-syntactic pause. The second line contains a ‘leftover’ from the first phrase, the word “pokrova” (“blanket”), as well as the first word of the second phrase, “came.”

The phraseological units “snow-blanket” and “guest-sorrow” are grammatically paralleled, but they, in a sense, take each other’s metric place in the poem: the separation of “blanket” from “snow” seems artificial, but it would not be so in the case of “guest-sorrow,” with the natural pause between the two words. “Guest” and “sorrow,” taken out of context, are words semantically alien to each other, but Dalos does not split them, foregrounding the word “sorrow,” but rather puts them next to each other in the same line. The word “toska” (“sorrow”) could have easily been replaced by a different word even in the context of this poem: “gost’ia-pechal” (“guest-sadness”), “gost’ia-odinochestvo” (“guest-loneliness”), “gost’ia-pustota” (“guest-emptiness”), etc. Disyllabic words work better because of the ternary metric skeleton of the poem; written down in a single line, the poem appears almost as a perfect example of anapest, a ternary meter with the stress on the third syllable (*Figure 2*).

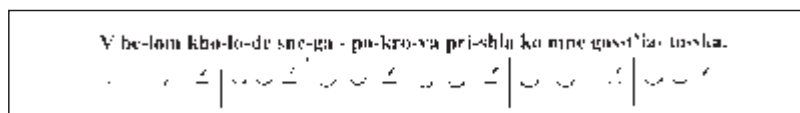


Figure 2: Anapestic metric structure of the text, if written in a single line

However, the words “gost’ia” and “toska” are closely connected through the ‘s’ sound, which is also present in the first line of the poem in the word “sne-ga” (“snow”). Therefore, the sound-content combines “snow,” “guest,” and “sorrow” into one semantic group.⁵ The metaphor “gost’ia-toska” (“guest-sorrow”) is very beautiful and effective, but if the two words were separated from each other graphically, the poet could have made a reader wonder

⁴ Barry P. Scherr, *Russian Poetry: Meter, Rhythm, and Rhyme*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1986, p. 263.

⁵ In this paper I use terms ‘semantic group’ and ‘semantic field’ interchangeably. The linguistic notion of the semantic field, according to Eva Kittay, is based on the idea “that both lexical items and the concepts associated with them come not singly but in groupings defined by specifiable relations of contrast and affinity” (see Eva F. Kittay, ‘Semantic Fields and the Individuation of Content,’ in *Frames, Fields, and Contrasts: New Essays in Semantic and Lexical Organization*, ed. by Lehrer and Kittay, Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers 1992, p. 229). Thus, using Lotman’s approach, we place the words “snow,” “guest” and “sorrow” into one semantic field or group in the context of this poem. Conversely, the words “blanket” and “came” belong to a different semantic field as will be shown below.

for a moment who that “guest” was. Contrary to that, in the semantic unit “snega-pokrova” (“snow-blanket”) each of the two words can hardly be substituted. Still, the poet separates them by a ‘run-on line.’

Looking closer, one can see that all three words of the first line carry an image of coldness: “white,” “chill,” “snow.” Dalos transfers the qualifiers/adjectives in this sequence, having “white chill” instead of “white snow.” “Blanket,” on the other hand, even being paired with “snow” grammatically, is a word within the semantic field ‘warmth.’ Therefore, as a unit, “snow-blanket” possesses a certain oxymoronic quality, a contradiction between ‘chill’ and ‘warmth’. I believe, this is exactly what Dalos is emphasising by using enjambment between lines one and two: she separates these two opposites while also uniting them. Still, the co-existence of the words “pokrova” and “prishla” (“blanket” and “came,” respectively) in the second line is dictated by their phonemic similarities (*Figure 3*):

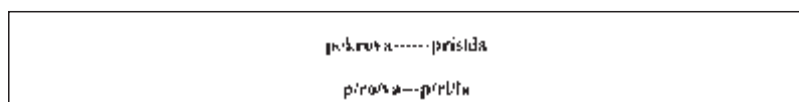


Figure 3: Phonemic similarities between the words “pokrova” and “prishla”

Unlike the three ‘cold’ words of the first line, which evoke the feeling of distance and space, these two words constitute one semantic group, that of ‘close, near, warm.’ The third line in a sense summarises the two previous ones: “gost’ia” (“a guest”), is somebody or something that ‘came’, ‘became close in space,’ but this word is neither ‘warm’ nor ‘cold’ until it ‘resolves’ into the next word, “toska” (“sorrow”), which is both ‘cold’ and ‘inside’. The last line is structurally unified through a progression of gutturals and vowels, as seen from *Figure 4* (in the words “ko” and “toska”, ‘o’ is an unstressed vowel pronounced as ‘a’):

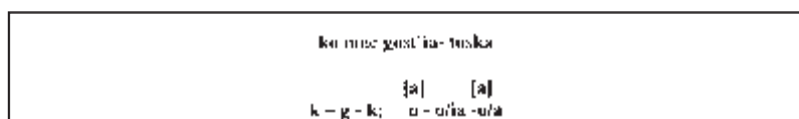


Figure 4: A progression of gutturals and vowels in the second line of the text

To summarise, it appears that the use of enjambment in this poem highlights a semantic progression from the world of ‘cold, distant’ (first line) to ‘warm, close’ (2nd line), and finally to ‘cold, inside’ (3rd line) (*Figure 5*):

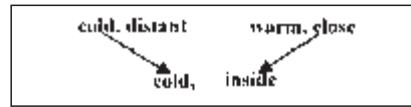


Figure 5: Semantic design of the poem

II. Music

Analogously to the poem, there are three layers of musical structure present in this one-page fragment of *Scenes from a Novel* (Example 1). The soprano

The image displays a musical score for the piece 'Visit' (No. 13) from György Kurtág's *Scenes from a Novel*, op. 19. The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes the vocal line (Canto) and the piano accompaniment (Cimbalom, Violino, and Contrabasso). The tempo marking 'Canto, non troppo lento' is placed above the vocal staff. The lyrics for the first system are 'В бе-дом-хо-ло-д-не-га-по-кро-ва'. The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment, with lyrics 'при-шла ко мне рас-тя-то-са-ка.' The piano part features complex textures with many notes, some marked with 'p' (piano) and 'sfz' (sforzando). The vocal line is written in a soprano clef.

Example 1: György Kurtág, *Scenes from a Novel*, op. 19, No. 13, 'Visit,' full score

part, following the three-line layout of Dalos's poem, consists of three short phrases. Each of these phrases outlines three different keys. The first one contains the pitches of A major-minor triad with two extra notes, D and B-flat. The second phrase may be viewed as an incomplete F major-minor triad with an added tone G. Similarly, the third phrase includes tonic and major and minor thirds of the implied D major-minor triad with an extra pitch B. Notably, the tonics of these three phrases in the voice line (A, F and D, respectively) also make up a minor triad.

If we look at other parts in a linear fashion, we discover that similar processes are taking place there too. The double bass, first, outlines the E major triad with an extra D, and then F minor triad (substituting G-sharp by its enharmonic equivalent A-flat) with an extra F# alien to it. In the violin part we find a melodic F major triad with an extra E; even the cimbalom's dyads form similar sonorities, such as an E-flat minor triad with an extra D flat in the beginning (see the first two dyads in the cimbalom's part). The last vertical sonority, heard in this fragment, is also an incomplete triad (C major-minor) with an extra D-flat. These mostly linear quasi-triadic formations create what I call an illusion of shifting tonality.

Another structural layer seems more closely modelled on the musical fragment's surface and, simultaneously, on the semantics of the text. There is a chain of perfect fifth dyads starting with d¹ in the double bass and a¹ in the violin and continuing in violin, cimbalom, and the beginning of the voice parts. The openness of fifths creates a 'cold' sensation, similar to the one in the Dalos poem.

A third, hidden layer of structure in the piece requires an even closer look. There are three structural processes taking place, which may be described as wedging-out-from a central pitch.⁶ First, before the voice enters, the musical content of this fragment is a perfect chromatic wedge-out-from-G#. g^{#1} occurs in the double bass part right after the first dyad g¹-a¹ in the violin line. It enters alone, unlike the other wedge members, which all occur in pairs. Also, G-sharp breaks the unity of the first dyad, placing itself in the dyad's center,

⁶ The idea of 'wedging' or symmetrical expansion of the musical space is borrowed in modified version from the works by George Perle, Ernő Lendvai, Elliott Antokoletz, and David Lewin among others (see George Perle's 'Symmetrical Foundations in the String Quartets of Béla Bartók,' in *The Music Review* 16, 1955, pp. 300-312, and 'Berg's Master Array of Interval Cycles,' in: *The Musical Quarterly*, 63, 1977, pp. 1-30; Ernő Lendvai's *Béla Bartók*, London: Kahn & Averill 1971 and *Symmetries of Music*, Kecskemét: Kodály Institute 1993; Elliott Antokoletz's *The Music of Béla Bartók*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1984 and *Twentieth Century Music*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall 1992; David Lewin's *Generalized Musical Intervals and Transformations*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press 1987 and 'A Way Into Schoenberg's Opus 15, Number 7', in: *In Theory Only* 6, 1981, pp. 3-24).

and therefore positioning G and A on opposite sides of the central pitch. The perfection of this wedge lies in its symmetrically expanding range, if we consider pitch-classes rather than pitches, and also in its entirely symmetrical instrumentation (*Figure 6*). Notably, the double bass plays D at the end of the wedge, which forms an interval class 6 with the wedge center G#, and therefore, belongs to the axis of symmetry.

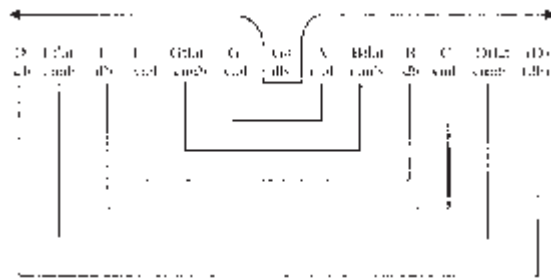


Figure 6: The first chromatic wedge-out-from G#

An interesting detail is that after the wedge is completed with D, the next note occurring in the double bass part is again G#. Thus, at the end of the wedge we hear the representation of the two pitch-classes that make up its axis of symmetry. More importantly, G# is the starting point for a second expanding chromatic wedge-formation. As *Figure 7* shows, here Kurtág uses a slightly different instrumentation, which is only partially symmetrical.

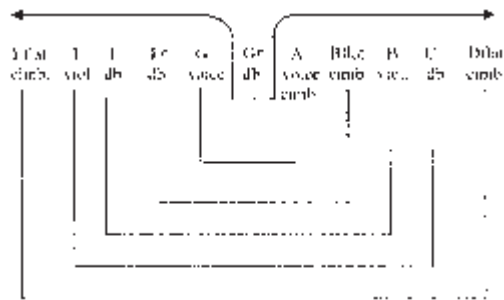


Figure 7: The second chromatic wedge-out-from G#

One more wedge can be found in the second, open-fifth structural layer of ‘Visit,’ discussed earlier. The order of the pitches, involved in the perfect fifths-motion is entirely symmetrical registrally, evenly widening the musical space in both upward and downward directions, as *Figure 8* demonstrates.

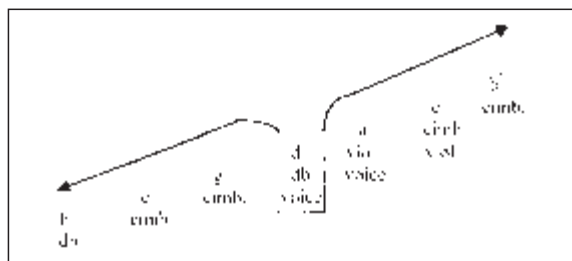


Figure 8: Fifths-wedge-out-from D

The beginning of this wedge-out-from d^1 overlaps with the ending of the first chromatic wedge, employing the member of the axis of the latter, the D, as its wedge-centre. Also, the fifths-wedge temporally coincides with the second chromatic wedge. Thus, we have, in a sense, a chain of overlapping wedges, constituting one structural layer of the piece.

The role of the voice part in ‘Visit’ is especially notable: it participates in all three layers of the piece, but most importantly, it carries a structural connection to the Dalos poem. Kurtág presents the text in three phrases, dividing the poem according to its natural metric-syntactic pauses and therefore ignoring the poet’s use of enjambment. However, the construction of the voice line creates an analogy for the enjambment in the text in a very original way.

As seen from *Figure 9*, the last two pitch-classes of the first phrase and the first pitch-class of the second phrase (C, B-flat, and F) constitute a segment of the circle of fifths. Similarly, the last two pitch-classes of the second phrase and the second pitch-class of the third phrase, namely, G, A, and D, form another mini-circle of fifths. Thus, the end of each phrase and the beginning of the next one are combined into one structural unit, which does not conform to the actual phrasing. By doing so Kurtág, in a sense, ‘transposes’ the main metric-syntactic principle of Dalos’s poem, enjambment, into his music. Also, the last pitch of the voice part, the B, is connected to the beginning of the piece by the same principle: it forms an even longer circle-of-fifths segment, D–A–E–B, which brings semantics of circularity to the music and, consequently, to the text. It incorporates the last word of the poem, “sorrow,” the last syllable of which in Kurtág’s setting coincides with b^1 , with the first line of the text, “In a white chill of a snow” corresponding to the first three notes in the voice part, into one semantic field ‘cold, empty.’



Figure 9: Enjambment-like construction of the voice line

III. Text and music

‘Visit’ brings us back to the truism that texts and music are separate systems. The most obvious aspect of Dalos’s poem, and one that seems to drive so much of its shape and discourse, is its threefold division; especially its immediately obvious division into three lines, which in turn spawns its semantic threefold division. Thus, the tripartite structural idea is basic to both Dalos’s poem and Kurtág’s setting. At the same time, in ‘Visit’ the composer demonstrates that the music is capable of changing the sequence of processes (poetic or psychological) that happen in linear fashion in a text; in a word, music is more freely synchronic than a text, which is usually diachronic (Figure 10).

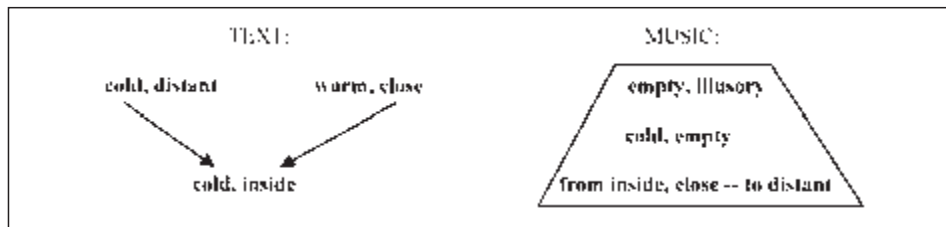


Figure 10: Comparison of semantic design of the text and music in ‘Visit’

For Kurtág, the three structural layers coexist in time. He overlays two chromatic wedge formations, the ‘empty’ fifths wedge, and quasi-triadic melodic phrases. Semantically, a wedge is ‘about’ creating a space from a lack of space, moving from ‘inside and close’ to ‘distant,’ but with the goal ending up as the starting point. The bare sound of perfect fifths also conveys feelings of space, coldness and emptiness. The three quasi-triadic phrases in the voice part – in a sense, three attempts to belong somewhere – are, nevertheless, destined to remain ‘unreal:’ the two perfect fifths in the very beginning of the soprano part define its ‘empty, illusory’ semantic content.

Musical ideas always have certain semantics, but our understanding of it is a matter of our own interpretation. According to my interpretation, the three structural/semantic layers in the music of 'Visit' correspond, but are not necessarily equivalent to the poem's threefold semantic division, where we find a very clear relationship of contrast and affinity between three semantic fields. Using music as his means of expression, Kurtág represents all three semantic layers at one and the same time. Thus, his setting both carries tripartite formal characteristics of the poem and at the same time demonstrates that the seemingly opposite semantic forces of 'cold' and 'warm' and 'distance' and 'closeness' in Dalos's poem are not necessarily linear phenomena, but rather one simultaneous complex whole. In that way, perhaps, Kurtág's setting might be thought of as more representative of the text than the text itself.

Let us imagine 'Visit' being performed without the words, a soprano singing on a neutral syllable. If later you happened to read this poem by Rimma Dalos, you probably would think: "Haven't I *heard* this poem recently?"