

BOOK REVIEW

Ulrich Tadday (ed.), (2020). *Musik-Konzepte Sonderband XI/2020. György Kurtág* (München: Edition Text + Kritik, ISBN 978-3-86916-878-4)

Reviewed by **Viktória OZSVÁRT***

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In 2020 the special edition of the series *Musik Konzepte* was dedicated to the creative path of the 95-year-old György Kurtág. Though the central aim of the present volume is not merely the celebration of the anniversary, yet it offers a solemn résumé: fourteen studies discuss the manifold questions that can be raised in connection with Kurtág's recent oeuvre. Each study has a different aspect: one can find overviews as well as strict analyses that concentrate on each little segment of a certain compositional solution. The book ends with the abstracts in English (pp. 332–333), and a timetable that lists the main events of Kurtág's life (pp. 334–335). This makes clear that the studies – although having been written in a scholarly style and with an exact methodology – address not only musicologists, but also performers, and they offer instructive and illuminating reading material to the larger public of contemporary music, too.

Many former monographs and study-volumes have already concerned themselves with the creative path of György Kurtág,¹ so in this sense the special edition of the *Musik Konzepte* connects to a lively discourse in contemporary music. Presenting the whole oeuvre would have generated an unlimited quantity of topics and writings, so the editor of the volume, Ulrich Tadday, concentrated on more particular topics. The first part of the book (“György Kurtág's Werk”) contains seven studies that present the creative art of Kurtág in the context of the European artistic directions that affirmed the margins of musical life after 1945. The second part (“György Kurtág's *Kafka-Fragmente* [1985–87] und ihre Tradition”) concentrates on the compositional and interpretational questions raised by the *Kafka-Fragments*, a work which can be regarded as emblematic in many aspects. The essays not only show several features of Kurtág's music as an organic part of its historical period, but they also reveal the inherent connections and recurring phenomena of the oeuvre. These topics include among others the different ways of representing of the inspiration gained from literature, or the psychological way of composition that also counts with the recipient and gives special attention to the psychosomatic effects while listening to music. Some of the studies deal with the generic types in

*E-mail: Ozsvart.Viktoria@abtk.hu

¹Friedrich SPANGEMACHER, *György Kurtág* [= *Musik der Zeit. Dokumentationen und Studien* 5.] (Bonn: Boosey & Hawkes, 1986); Péter HALÁSZ, *Kurtág György* (Budapest: Mágus, 1998); Friedemann SALLIS, Robin ELLIOTT and Kenneth DELONG (eds.), *Centre and Periphery, Roots and Exile. Interpreting the Music of István Anhalt, György Kurtág and Sándor Veress* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Lurier University Press, 2011).

Kurtág's view: chamber music, songs and the currently one and only opera offer many interesting aspects, and they are interpreted in a quite thought-provoking way in the volume.

The first three studies concern the effects of contemporary tendencies after 1945, and those of certain contemporaries of high importance in several phases during Kurtág's life. Jörn Peter Hiekel focuses on the aesthetic side of Kurtág's art, which he disposes in the context of the second half of the twentieth century. Hiekel also reveals a connection with the aesthetic views of Friedrich Schiller, especially with one of the German poet's main ideas, the aesthetic freedom ("ästhetischen Freiheit"). In this way Hiekel interprets the mechanism of Kurtág's musical universe in a large spectrum that holds together several parallels beginning from the classical era up to the twentieth century. He identifies sources of inspiration from the fields of music, literature, and fine arts, revealing also the way in which it became possible that in Kurtág's art the new European music proved to be able to get to a point of crystallization in historical, aesthetic, and geographical terms.

The courses for new music in Darmstadt and the personal influence of György Ligeti are considered in several studies of the volume. The academies for new music found a place in Darmstadt from 1946 – in the beginning yearly, and later, from 1970, in each second year –, and they were regarded as the center of contemporary avantgarde tendencies by the young generation of composers, among others Kurtág, too. It became general in Hungarian music historical discussion to analyze the works of Kurtág in the aspects of his personality and oeuvre. The study by Anna Dalos follows a different method: her essay presents Kurtág's avantgarde period – from Quartet no. 1 (1959) and *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* (1963) – in connection with the musical features of the works. She deals with Kurtág's relation to tradition, the use of dodecaphony in the composer's works, their programmatic nature that is based on gestures and human speech, and the predominance of short forms. The penetrating musical analysis proves the statement that Kurtág works with apparently traditional elements, and his musical thoughts are based on certain dichotomies, e.g. question–answer, returning–varying, melody–accompaniment, symmetry–asymmetry. The tension of the structure is organized with the help of these opposed elements, which reveals a method that significantly pays attention to the perception of the recipients. Though, what is more: it may look like if Kurtág would have composed his works from the viewpoint of the listeners. As Dalos emphasizes, this is the very attitude that had been rather unknown in the history of Hungarian composition, while in Darmstadt it played an important role, especially in the writings by one of the leading figures of the musical courses, Karlheinz Stockhausen. His text "Struktur und Erlebniszeit" could have inspired Kurtág to attain this new approach and to adapt it to his own style.²

The essay written by Lukas Haselböck also examines the contemporary tendencies that influenced Kurtág's creative art: he concentrates on the connection between Kurtág and Ligeti. The professional and personal relationship of the two Hungarian composers began right after their admission to the Liszt Academy in Budapest in 1945, and it lasted until Ligeti's death in 2006. Haselböck focuses on the pieces of information that can be filtered from the artistic products by the two composers. He lists in a table those works written by Kurtág and Ligeti which are dedicated to each other or reflect each other in any other ways. Although mingling

²Karlheinz STOCKHAUSEN, "Struktur und Erlebniszeit," in *Anton Webern*, ed. by Herbert EIMERT (Vienna: Universal, 1955), 69–79.



music and written documents in one and the same table might look a little confusing at first sight, it proves to be really informative and confirms Haselböck's statement that musical effect and reaction can only be traced from the side of Kurtág. The second half of Haselböck's essay is built on a close musical analysis. The *...quasi una fantasia...* is paralleled to Ligeti's Piano Concerto, and the *A kis csáva* (op. 15b) is discussed from the aspect of the form constructed with the help of gestures that can also be found in Ligeti's *Aventures*. The "*...le tout petite macabre – Ligetinek*" dedicated to Ligeti shows examples of musical humor in the context of *Le grand macabre*.

Besides "humor," the meaning of the "play" emerges from these studies. János Bali examines it in the example of *Jelek, játékok, üzenetek*. The starting point of his thoughts is a short film of 9 min, directed by the composer's grand-daughter, Judit Kurtág, and premiered on the occasion of Kurtág's 90th birthday in the BMC. Using the *Játékok* as a case-study, the essay reveals that the message of the home video shows many parallels with the whole of the Kurtágian oeuvre, and perhaps reveals its essence – just like the *Játékok* does. The series sometimes mentioned as "new op. 1" is still broadening nowadays, and it contains those features that may give a key to the works of Kurtág: among these features one can mention the personal atmosphere, a certain Shakespearian playfulness, a depth and love that are noticeable in the way they show human relationships, and a composition that develops without hurrying, quite organically.

According to Bali, the essence of *Játékok* is to reach maximal intensity with minimal notation. The factual features of the notation are detailed in the essay by Tobias Bleek. A knowledge of traditional notation is not enough for the interpretation of Kurtág's works in each case. His notation works in some other ways, the consequence of gesture-like or speech-like solutions. As a starting point Bleek uses the Quartet no. 1, also emphasizing the importance of gestures in the notation of this early composition. He also reveals its complexity: the musical gesture is not merely a sum of several parameters that together create an object, but it is a whole, indivisible phenomenon in itself. Kurtág's notation started to broaden after 1960. For this later period Bleek shows examples from manuscripts stored in the Paul Sacher Stiftung and from the publications by Editio Musica Budapest. The exterior look of the notation is an important question, because the note itself is an organic part of the composition. The edited notes pay attention to this specialty in many cases, e.g. in *József Attila töredékek* where the published note follows the original, non-regular layout of the manuscript.

The essays that deal with the *Sayings of Péter Bornemisza, József Attila töredékek*, Kurtág's Beckett settings – among them his first opera based on the text of Beckett's *Fin de partie* – and the *Kafka-Fragments* place the vocal genre in the center of the volume. In his paper Tom Rojo Poller examines the gestures of receiving and surrender, as well as the mixing of these two kinds of attitude in Kurtág's vocal works. While outlining the dynamics of these processions, Poller points out that caused by a special, bipolar oscillation, interior, personal material cannot be differentiated from the foreign one. Poller analyzes two groups of works: both versions of *What is the word?* (op. 30a–b) and *...pas à pas...-t* (op. 36), which is a setting of the *mirlitonaides* by Beckett. The sensitive analysis shows that on the one hand the *mirlitonaides*-settings abound in intertextual references, on the other hand *What is the word?* is a so-called "Text-Inszenierung." This means that the first work is strongly connected to its text, while the second represents the theatrical presence itself.

Robert Moser examines *Fin de partie*, maintaining a focus on the traditional features of the operatic genre. He discusses questions raised by the subject, the text set to music, the selection of



the apparatus, and the structure of the scenes. He points out that Kurtág's work while being an opera, a musical genre, yet uses types which are well known from the spoken drama (Prolog, Monolog, Dialog). Among these neutral subtitles only the "Poubelle" represents an exception. In his essay Moser deals with the interpretation of this scene, because it could have been the one that gave the inspiration to the whole work. Moser argues that the dichotomy of cleanliness and dirtiness plays a central role in Kurtág's oeuvre from the Quartet no. 1 on.

In the second part of the volume – while the general statements of the first part continue to recur – one finds case-studies that scrutinize the *Kafka-Fragments* (op. 24). Kurtág became acquainted with the writings of Franz Kafka during the 1950s through the mediation of György Ligeti. Kafka's writings have a mystic atmosphere, they raise questions of initiation that merit a special and complex meaning in the works of Kurtág, too. In his essay William Kindermann underlines the strong mental connection that captured Kurtág in the diaries by Kafka. One of the main tasks of Kafka's writings is the alteration from a human being into an animal with all of its consequences. The *Kafka-Fragments*' 14th piece ("Einen Augenblick lang fühlte ich mich umpanzert.") is based on an entry from 1911, and it is strongly related to Kafka's novel *Metamorphosis* which was published in 1912. The metamorphosis into an animal plays an important part in both writings. Also the apparatus of the *Kafka-Fragments* shows an essential connection, namely that the singer is accompanied by the violin – as Kindermann emphasises, it is the sound of the violin itself that recalls human emotions in the transformed Gregor Samsa. On the connection between human and animal beings Martin Zenck outlines in his essay the often-used poetic symbol of the horse, paying attention to the gesture-like solutions in Kurtág's music.

Two essays deal with the formal conception of the *Kafka-Fragments*. Majid Motavasseli focuses on the problems of building a cycle. She argues that the *Kafka-Fragments* cannot be categorized as a cycle in the traditional sense, because the different order of the pieces in every new performance shows a novel aspect of the work each time it is performed. Motavasseli shows a parallel with the concept of the "open work" originated from Umberto Eco. Christian Uitz uses another term borrowed from Eco, the dichotomy of continuity–discontinuity. As Uitz emphasizes, the exact dates of the pieces in the series resemble a diary, just like most of the Kafka-texts used in the setting. This fragmentariness is often used in the works written by Kurtág: the series *Játékok*, the *Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*, and the *József Attila Fragments* can be added to this group of works. Nevertheless, it appears that the *Kafka-Fragments* would also refer to traditional forms like the sonata – a statement which is also discussed in the essay by Motavasseli. In the second part of his essay, Uitz compares fourteen recordings with the method of "augmented listening" formulated by Nicholas Cook.³ Recordings also stand in the center of the last two essays of the volume: Thomas Glaser shows the effects of varying performances to the perception, while Cecilia Oinas looks for reflections of the Kurtágian tradition in the five existing commercial recordings of the work.

All of these questions are summed up in the essay located at the beginning of the second part and written by Simone Hohmaier. Hohmaier reviews the position of the *Kafka-Fragments* in the context of the vocal genre, and she examines a number of possibilities in the connection of musical analysis and interpretation. She raises the essential question: how can a theoretical

³Nicholas COOK, *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).



approach help the performance of a musical work? Speaking about *Kafka-Fragments* this question needs to be addressed, because the order of the pieces in the published score is not determined by Kurtág, but by the editor, András Wilhelm. Though this order has been accepted and validated by the composer himself, it is still a problem to solve for the performers as an example of the “open work.” What does it all mean? Maybe only an incisive, intellectual analysis can lead the performers to the true interpretation? Is a personal relationship needed between the composer and the performer to interpret the work in the way it is meant to be? Although, Hohmaier answers this latter question with a determined “no,” she considers the aspiration to a deeper, intellectual understanding indispensable. If the thoughts which lie behind the score are unknown to the performing artist, he or she will be challenged to find the proper way to convey the content, that cannot be directly indicated by the notation. In this case, the essence of the work is lacking.

Among the essays one can miss the type of oral history. Perhaps this is the result of the conception: the analyses and essays raise the feeling that one learns about a composer who has already been part of the classical canon. The conception also helps to unite the studies in a whole process that leads our attention from the general view into smaller and smaller case-studies. The recurrence of one or another thought is not at all disturbing or superfluous, but helps to shed light on the same problem from a different aspect. All of these features of the volume help the reader – be he or she a musicologist, composer, performer or someone who is simply interested in cultural history – to find significant revelations.

