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## The Compositional Process in Diaries: On the Notes in György Kurtág's Sketches

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is focused on a specific feature of György Kurtág's sketches, namely the textual notes that accompany musical sketches, ideas and memos. The study describes the types of these textual notes and tries to shed light on the psychological functions of these notes during the compositional process. I also seek to explore the role of these notes in shaping the musical form in the planned works. These notes portray Kurtág as a self-critical composer at odds with himself, but who resolves the difficulties he encounters while composing with humour. I argue that these notes function as a diary. The textual notes also document the conscious use of quotations, self-quotations and allusions so typical to the intertextual art of György Kurtág's music.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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György Kurtág; philology; sketches; compositional method; Sigmund Freud

When Bálint András Varga asked the composer about the importance of unconscious and instinctive impulses in his creative work, György Kurtág replied with puzzling frankness: 'Nothing else is important! My brain never gets me far. As I've told you before, when I know how to do something, when I know what the form will be like, what kind of variations or systems will be in the piece—then I normally don't write it' (Kurtág 2009, 42). Kurtág's response emphasises the spontaneity of his compositional process: too much knowledge about the work ultimately prevents its creation. A similar thought appears earlier in the same interview: 'The piece only counts the next day: if it still interests me, then at least it's not bad. If there is too much doctoring to do, then it begins to look suspect' (Kurtág 2009, 34). Such statements could even lead to the erroneous conclusion that Kurtág does little revising on the initial material during the compositional process, but rather seeks to capture spontaneous inspiration in notation. However, the large number of sketches and sketchbooks produced while composing and preserved in the György Kurtág Collection of the Paul Sacher Foundation (from here: PSS) fundamentally contradict such an assumption.

Kurtág is not trying to hide his difficulties with composing in the interviews with Varga. He repeatedly refers to his 'creative paralysis', meaning in part the psychological breakdown that occurred in Paris in 1957, from which he was able to emerge with the help of art therapist Marianne Stein, and in part to the paralysis that preceded the composition of *Játékok* [Games] around 1973, from which he was jolted out by the

experiences of two trips, first to Italy and later to Transylvania (Kurtág 2009, 6, 43, 58). He mentions that when suffering from an artistic crisis, he was only able to draw, or ‘set down signs’ (Kurtág 2009, 22). He has no qualms about speaking of ‘obsession’, ‘being pursued’, or ‘compulsive actions’ in connection with his own behaviour when working on music, and stresses that ‘I’m always composing my autobiography ... these obsessive aspects are also part of it’ (Kurtág 2009, 63). He calls his wife, Márta the projection of his ‘superego’ (Kurtág 2009, 29). At the same time, Márta registers a ‘self-flagellant streak’ in her husband’s personality (Kurtág 2009, 49).

Kurtág’s formulations in the interviews show an exceptionally self-reflexive composer who is consciously observing and coming to terms with his own creative nature and practice. The extent to which his vocabulary, like Márta’s, draws on Freudian psychoanalysis cannot escape attention. Nevertheless, Kurtág mentions Sigmund Freud’s name only once in the three interviews with Varga, in connection with György Ligeti’s reading of Freud’s collection of four essays, *Totem and Taboo* (Kurtág 2009, 97). Furthermore, he recalls two of his psychoanalysts, Lili Perl (1891–1965), whom he visited with his wife and to whose memory he dedicated *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*, and Imre Hermann (1889–1984), whom he visited with graphic artist Sári Gerlóczy (\*1931) (Kurtág 2009, 73, 17).

In my study, which deals with the notes written into György Kurtág’s compositional sketches and sketchbooks, accessible in microfilm format at the PSS, I aim to answer the question of what kind of role these notes play in the compositional process. There is no question that these notes often have, besides musical considerations, a primarily psychological function. Kurtág’s sketches and sketchbooks thus provide insight not only into the musical-compositional process of creation but also into the psychological process behind the works’ genesis. Although several researchers working on Kurtág have already examined the composer’s sketches, primarily source materials related to a single work or group of works (Beckles Willson 2004; Bleek 2010; Kinderman 2017; Kunkel 2008; Sallis 2002; Stahl 1998), and Friedemann Sallis even attempted to classify the types of sketches in 2008 based on the sources available at that time (Sallis 2008), the textual references that accompany musical notes in many of these sketches have not yet been studied.

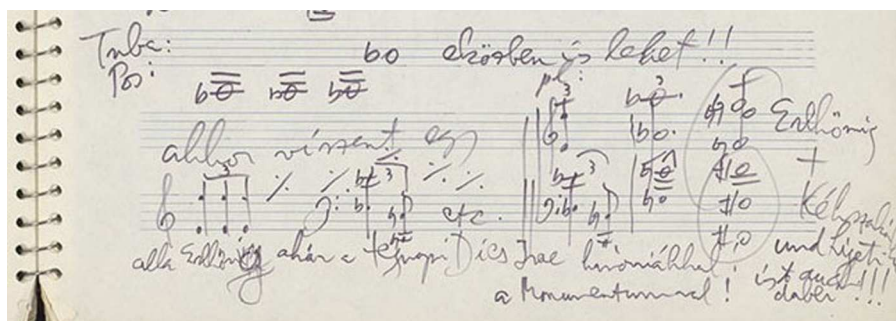
## Types of Notes

The Kurtág collection of the PSS preserves more than one hundred sketchbooks used by the composer on a daily basis. In addition to these, numerous sketches have survived on separate sheets of papers as well. I have examined seventy sketchbooks that were created between the finalisation of *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* (1969) and 1999, the work on *Fancsikó és Pinta* [Fancsikó and Pinta] Op. 40 on Péter Esterházy’s words, and contain sketches of compositions which were either finished or abandoned during this period.<sup>1</sup> I have not examined the sketchbooks used before and during the completion of *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*, given that this would have almost doubled the amount of material to be analyzed.<sup>2</sup> As I was working with the microfilm copies of the sketchbooks, I excluded the notes from after 1999, which are not yet available on microfilm. I have also examined the sketches of the works written between 1969 and 1999.<sup>3</sup> This group of sources include both specific sketchbooks and individual sketch sheets occasionally stitched together, as well as the fair copy form of the pieces.

Most of the sketchbooks used by Kurtág are what was easily available in Hungary at the time: small landscape-format notebooks or large portrait-format ones. The latter ones are spiral-bound. A few of the notebooks are more unique. Kurtág, for example, used a very small music booklet provided for the participants at the first music festival in communist Hungary titled *First Music Week*, held in Budapest in 1951, but he did not immediately put it into use. The unidentifiable small sketches in it are probably from after 1956.<sup>4</sup> The Kurtág-collection also includes one notebook printed in Germany, which he used for his unfinished orchestral piece, *Huszonnégy antifona* Op. 10 [24 Antiphonae], composed mostly between 1970 and 1971.<sup>5</sup> The composer used pencils and ballpoint pens to write his sketches.

Most of Kurtág's notes are written in Hungarian. However, it is noteworthy that Kurtág frequently uses Italian to give performance instructions, even in the earliest stages of composition when he is sketching out musical ideas. These instructions always refer to the musical characters and are much more detailed and varied than the Italian and German instructions about which András Bálint Varga asked the composer in his third major interview (Kurtág 2009, 37–38). In sketches for vocal works in German or French, performance instructions in these languages also occasionally appear.<sup>6</sup> In addition to notes in Hungarian, Italian, German, French, and Russian, there are also notes in Latin, Romanian, and English.<sup>7</sup> Over the years, Kurtág has developed a uniform language for his own notes: it is striking, for example, that he mostly uses dashes instead of commas, which is completely alien to the rules of Hungarian punctuation. He always abbreviates the names of instruments, as well as the names of the sections of musical form. The 'm.t.' abbreviation, for example, always refers to the secondary theme of the sonata form in Hungarian (the abbreviation for 'melléktéma'), while 'z.t.' or 'zt.' (the abbreviation for 'zárótéma') refers to the closing section or themes of the exposition.<sup>8</sup>

In his notes, Kurtág frequently refers to other composers or their works. These references cover the entire history of music. Some of these references are relatively easy-to-interpret in the context of the work in progress. For example, in the sketchbook containing the material for the Double Concerto, Op. 27 No. 2 (1989–1990), Kurtág makes several references to Vivaldi, which is understandable in the context of the history of the concerto genre.<sup>9</sup> Similar references to Corelli also appear.<sup>10</sup> In other cases, however, the meaning of such references is much more difficult to decipher. In sketchbook No. 59, which contains the source material for the planned but not finished piano concerto, *Confessio* (Op. 21, Kurtág was working on it mainly between 1982 and 1985), there is a reference with work titles in Hungarian and German at the bottom of one page (Figure 1): 'Erlkönig + Kékszakkáll und Ligeti is auch dabei!!!' [Erlkönig + Bluebeard and Ligeti is also present]. Further down, he adds: 'alla Erlkönig akár a tegnapi Dies irae harmóniákkal! A Monumentummal!' [in the way of Erlkönig, even with the Dies irae harmonies from yesterday! With Monumentum!].<sup>11</sup> Kurtág refers in these notes to Schubert's ballad (Op. 1) and Bartók's only opera, as well as to Ligeti's composition, *Monument—Selbstportrait—Bewegung* (1976). The formula 'Ligeti ist auch dabei' reflects humourously on the subtitle of Ligeti's *Selbstportrait* movement: 'Selbstportrait mit Reich und Riley (und Chopin ist auch dabei)' [Self-portrait with Reich and Riley (and Chopin is also present)]. The reference to the 'Dies irae harmonies' is also telling: Kurtág was planning a *Dies irae* at the time of working on *Confessio*. It is not clear whether this was

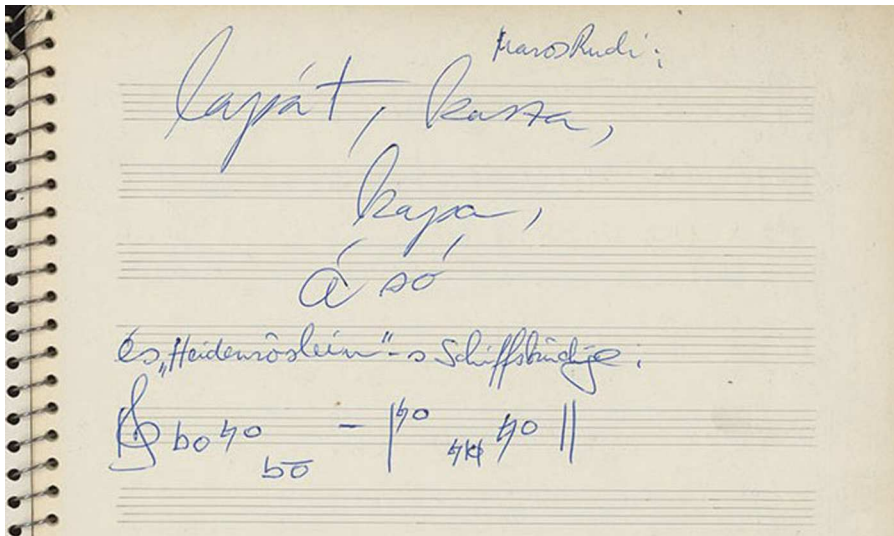


**Figure 1.** Sketchbook 59, György Kurtág Collection, Paul Sacher Stiftung, MF 0320: 0877.

intended to be a separate work, or if it was planned to be part of *Confessio* as a kind of homage to Liszt's *Totentanz*, which also paraphrases the *Dies irae* theme. Nevertheless, references to the planned *Dies irae* appear in different sketchbooks and in different forms, always in close proximity to the sketches of the piano concerto. One of them, with harmonies, pops up just one page earlier, written down one day before the note I quoted above.<sup>12</sup>

Ligeti's name appears several additional times in the sketches. In the Double Concerto, for example, Kurtág planned to quote from Ligeti's String Quartet No. 1 (*Metamorphoses nocturnes*, 1953–1954).<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere, the names of Stockhausen and Boulez crop up.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the names of Hungarian composers also appear on the pages of the sketchbooks. When referring to the large-scale form of a piece, he mentions Zsolt Durkó's (1934–1997) name.<sup>15</sup> He also sets Sándor Szokolay (1931–2013) as an example,<sup>16</sup> urging himself to list as many motifs as possible, and he mentions Sándor Balassa's (1935–2021) chamber music piece, *Tabulae* (Op. 25, 1975) as a model when using ostinatos.<sup>17</sup> If one is familiar with the works of these composers—with Durkó's large formal constructions, Szokolay's bewildering creative productivity, and Balassa's fondness for tight rhythmic formulae modelled on Stravinsky's music—Kurtág's references will be quite telling.

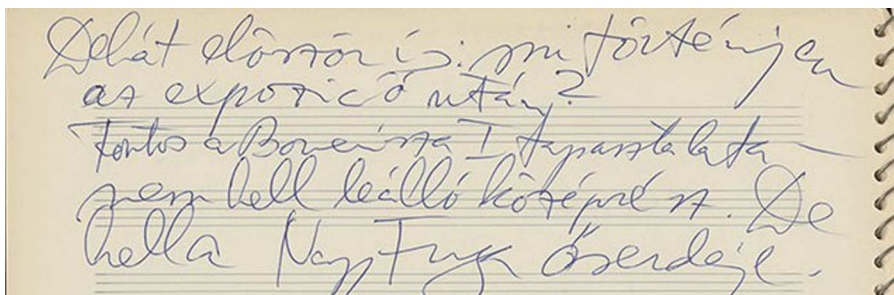
However, the greatest difficulty in understanding the notes is precisely that one needs to know the music literature, whether past or present, with which Kurtág is familiar in order to decode the chain of associations that refer to other composers; no easy task, given Kurtág's exceptional knowledge of musical repertoire. Sometimes, however, even this is not enough because the reference is largely personal and, therefore, incomprehensible. One reference to Hungarian composer Rudolf Maros (1917–1982) makes this clear (Figure 2): 'Maros Rudi: lapát, kasza, kapa, ásó és 'Heidenröslein'—és Schiffbrüchige' [Rudi Maros: shovel, scythe, hoe, spade, and 'Heidenröslein'—and Shipwrecked].<sup>18</sup> The succession of these words is puzzling, especially to the reader who knows Hungarian, because the words 'ásó' and 'kapa' [spade and hoe], together with 'nagyharang' [big bell], are part of a folk expression referring to marriage, which should last forever, 'till death (spade, hoe, and the big bell) do us part'. However, the reference to Goethe's poem (*Heidenröslein*) and Heine's (*Der Schiffbrüchige*) is difficult to interpret in this context, or at least would lead to explanations that are too speculative to justify.



**Figure 2.** Sketchbook 14, György Kurtág Collection, Paul Sacher Stiftung, MF 0318: 0544.

In the notes, Kurtág often refers to his own works as well. He most often returns to *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* as if it serves as a kind of collection basin or a reservoir for later works, both in terms of basic musical characters and technical solutions.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the vocal concerto forms the basis of Kurtág's intertextual art, which is, as is well known, characterised by self-quotations, self-references, and rewritings of earlier works.<sup>20</sup> The notes in the sketchbooks clearly document how earlier works are consciously incorporated into or reused in later compositions. One telling example is the reappearance of a reference to the first part of *The Sayings* in the sketches of ... *Quasi una fantasia* ... (Op. 27 No. 1, 1987–1988), which speaks about the 'importance of the experiences of Bornemisza I' ('Fontos a Bornemisza I tapasztalata'). These 'experiences' are connected to a musical effect in the earlier piece, which could be interpreted as either the screech of a pen or Morse signals (Figure 3).<sup>21</sup>

As the number of Kurtág's works increased, so did the number of references to his own compositions. A dense network of self-quotations and self-references has developed in his oeuvre. This tendency manifests itself in the sketches as well, particularly in the



**Figure 3.** Sketchbook 15, György Kurtág Collection, Paul Sacher Stiftung, MF 0632.

notes. Besides *The Sayings*, many references point to *Játékok*, which, more than any other work, has served as the most important reservoir for later works, and not only for the different series and versions of the collection *Signs, Games, Messages*, but for almost all instrumental and some of the vocal pieces written after the piano series or at the same time. Therefore, the notes between the musical sketches also help reveal self-quotations hidden in the works.

A telling example is the Double Concerto. Its sketches recall the ‘Nichtsdergleichen’ movement of the *Kafka-Fragmente* (Op. 24, 1985–1986) as a model for the virtuosity in one of its sections. At one point, Kurtág speaks about the cello part: ‘Tuttiban is vagy csak Nichtsdergleichen Vc. széllökések’ [Tutti or only Nichtsdergleichen V[iolon]-c[ello] gusts].<sup>22</sup> The complexity of such self-references can be illustrated by a reference in the sketches of ... *Quasi una fantasia* ... , where Kurtág refers back to the Bartók quotation in the texture of *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*: ‘Bartók hgvers. idézet mint Bornemiszában’ [Quotation from Bartók’s Violin Concerto in the same way as in Bornemisza].<sup>23</sup>

Kurtág often refers to the intended performers of his works in the notes that accompany his sketches. The main function of these notes to remind Kurtág of the performer’s specific requirements and abilities. In the sketches for the Double Concerto Kurtág writes: ‘Kocsisnak egy mechanikus, egyszerű ossiát a gyors tanuláshoz’ [for fast learning, Kocsis needs a mechanical, simple ossia].<sup>24</sup> Another note asks which is the deepest note singer István Gáti can sing.<sup>25</sup> The notes also include a question about whether József Szalay’s cimbalom has a C#2. The cimbalom of Márta Fábíán also raises questions: ‘fontos részletkérdés: ha lehet, a koncerten Fábíán Márta a saját hangszerén játs[s]zon, sokszor azért kiábrándító számomra a hangszer színe, mert a rádióbeli hangszer olyan durva ...’ [an important detail: if possible, Márta Fábíán should play her own instrument, I am often disappointed by the instrument’s timbre because the instrument at the Radio is so harsh].<sup>26</sup> During the preparations for *Confessio*, Kurtág consulted percussion player Zoltán Rácz on the characteristics of the percussion instruments, many of which he hand-picked for the players of the Amadinda Percussion Group.<sup>27</sup> He even noted the date of the consultation (December 21, 1984).<sup>28</sup> In addition to traditional instruments, he was interested in quite unusual percussive effects, such as the rattling of paper, or the rustling of silk or a raincoat. Instead of the sound of dry leaves, perhaps at Rácz’s suggestion, he chose the African (and later South American) instrument, the cabasa.<sup>29</sup>

That the memo of the date of the consultation indicated is not a unique phenomenon. Kurtág’s sketches and sketchbooks are full of dates. Including these dates makes the sketchbooks similar to diaries as they record the composer’s musical ideas and various thoughts on a day-to-day basis. However, this interpretation simplifies the function of the dates. Some sketchbooks indicate the year of use on the inside of the front or back cover,<sup>30</sup> but sometimes quite different dates appear on the inside, occasionally even more than one date on a single page. Therefore, the dates inside the sketchbooks serve rather as memory aids for the composer. Kurtág, on the one hand, records when an idea comes to his mind and captures the moment of inspiration, sometimes even linking it to an event. For example, he writes down working on his Op. 10: ‘1 X Márta első telefon után’ [October 1, after Márta’s first call].<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, he refers back later to these dates to remind himself of the ideas recorded in the earlier date’s

sketches. This can be seen, for example, in the sketches for ... *Quasi una fantasia* ... . He writes on a sketch sheet: ‘26 VI és majd esetleg fölé a grave sirató negyedeit’ [June 26 and then possibly above them the quarters of the grave lament].<sup>32</sup> On another sheet, he notes ‘régí jó kadencia! 88 IV 2-től’ [the good old cadence! From April 2, 1988].<sup>33</sup>

His sketches are full of such references. They are, in fact, documenting the composer’s exceptional memory, as Kurtág is able to recall ideas, sometimes connected to personal memories, to be revisited while composing a work with the help of these dates. Furthermore, an idea with a date may even have a chance to find its place in completely different works, which, again, demonstrates the close connections between the works of the oeuvre and the dense web of self-references. For example, at the time of working on two works at the same time, a *De profundis* in Hungarian for voice and piano, and a piano trio at the beginning of the 1970s—neither have been completed—, he wrote in the sketches for *De profundis*: ‘7 VIII és ez mindjárt a Trio II tétel anyaga is lehet’ [August 7, and this can be soon the material for the second movement of the trio].<sup>34</sup>

## Superego

Such dates-as-reminders are occasionally accompanied by tragic events, as if they could not only help recall the dates and the musical ideas associated with them, but would also help process the tragic experience. When musicologist András Pernye committed suicide (April 4, 1980), Kurtág was working on *Messages of the Late R. V. Troussova* Op. 17 (1976–1980), the second movement of the first part (‘День упал’/‘The day has fallen’) under deadline pressure. He noted:

6 IV húsvét vasárnap előre állított órák egy órával kevesebb ... Gyerünk—most a partitúra—a legnehezebb lépés el lett indítva—most végig kell harmonizálni a darabot.

Meghalt Pernye—öngyilkos lett—tovább romlott a mozgása—ez így rosszul hat. Szép Pándi Marianne emlékezésre. De kedd reggelre estére kész kellene legyen a День упал.

April 6, Easter Sunday[,] clock set forward by one hour, one hour less ... Let’s go, now the score, the most difficult step has been started, now the piece should be harmonized all the way through.

Pernye died, he committed suicide—his motor function further deteriorated—this is looking bad. Marianne Pándi’s reminiscence is nice. But День упал should be ready by Tuesday morning.<sup>35</sup>

The sketchbooks contain many personal notes like this and, therefore, are similar to diaries in this respect too. In them, Kurtág is able to open up and give voice to his anxieties, doubts, and moods. Occasionally, they even contain quotations from poems, primarily from the poems of Attila József (1905–1937).<sup>36</sup>

The diary-like character of the sketches and especially of the sketchbooks is reinforced by the fact that Kurtág regularly engages with himself in dialogue, addressing himself in the second person singular. The *speaker* of the notes, the *voice* that addresses the composer, seems to be a critical, abusive superego, sometimes scolding, sometimes encouraging. The term ‘superego’, which Kurtág, as we have seen, connected to his wife Márta (Kurtág 2009, 29), refers to the general practice of parenting based on remorse, and has an undeniable Freudian origin (Freud 1991).



The encouragement is mostly given in a very gentle, professional tone, although the frequent use of exclamation marks does reflect an agitated, emphatic state: ‘előbb írd meg zenei szöveget aztán a sztereo adta akcentus nagy meglepetés lehetőségeket ki lehet aplikálni!! de előbb egy szöveget azt lehet csak szétszakítani!’ [First, you should write a musical texture, then it is possible to exploit the surprise possibilities of the stereo accents!! but first you need a texture, only that can be torn apart!].<sup>37</sup> Or in other sketches instructions are displayed: ‘Ha akarod[,] veszel egy C.F-t akár gregoriánból, akár Reihéből—és az már egy formai lefolyás. Az előbbi nyolcszólamú menet, akármilyen primitív, bontható—melodikusan’ [If you want, you can take a Cantus Firmus either from Gregorian chant or from a Reihe, and this is already a formal process. The former is an eight-part process, and no matter how primitive, it can be broken down into parts, melodically].<sup>38</sup> A similar instruction is given on another sketch in a slightly gentler tone: ‘Próbáljuk újra: csak egyszerűen és pregnáns formulákkal’ [Let’s try again: simply and with concise formulas].<sup>39</sup>

Such dialogues usually have a stimulating tone. In addition to the phrases quoted above, such as ‘you should’, ‘let’s try’, and ‘if you want’, similar phrases appear in other notes. Examples include ‘újra az egészet’ [do it all over again], ‘gyerünk’ [go on], ‘ez lesz a jó. vagy jobbat?’ [it’s going to be good. or better?], ‘holnap találunk mást is’ [we’ll find something else tomorrow], ‘holnap döntök’ [I’ll decide tomorrow] or ‘hát ezt akartad? Várjunk, várjunk!’ [is that what you desired? Wait, wait].<sup>40</sup> In some cases, Kurtág loses patience with himself. The superego addresses him in an almost abusive way: ‘sajnos itt fúrni-faragni kell. Ha szórakozni akarsz—menj moziba! Ez türelemjáték! De ha a Wahre Weg-végére jártál!?!?’ [unfortunately, here you have to try different things. If you want to have fun, go to the movies. It’s a waiting game! But when you get to the end of the Wahre Weg!?!?].<sup>41</sup> The tone is not at all unfamiliar from lecturing, and it is designed to arouse guilt by referring to the second part of *Kafka-Fragmente* (‘Der Wahre Weg’), in which the imperative of facing difficulties in the process of becoming an artist (or, more generally, a human) is discussed. Surprisingly, it is precisely in the sketches of ‘Der Wahre Weg’ that a similar guilt-inducing statement appears: ‘ha lenne bátorságod ¼ hangokkal dolgozni ...’ [if you had the courage to work with quarter tones ...].<sup>42</sup>

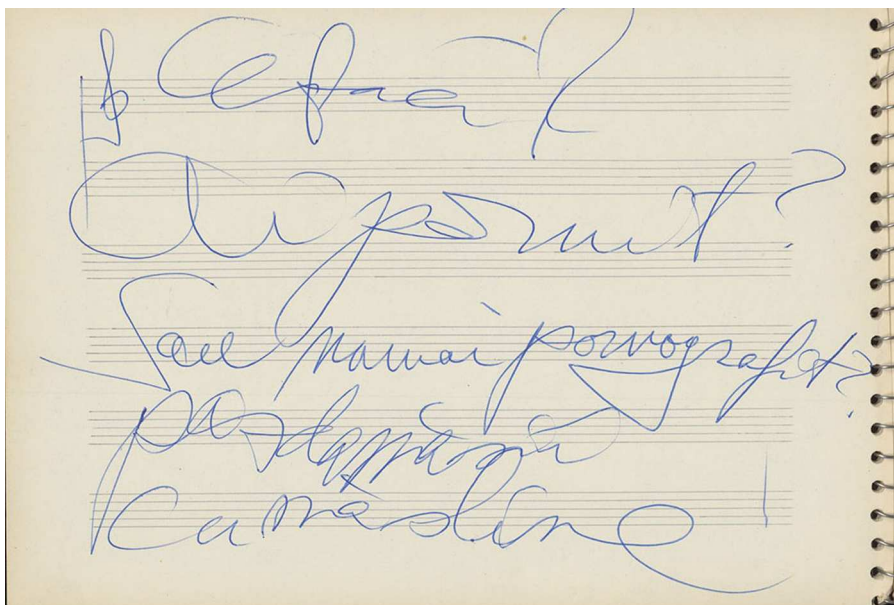
Kurtág frequently records the questions: ‘hová?’ [where?], along with ‘mikor?’ [when?] and ‘hogyan?’ [how?], which always refer to the problem of where and how to place certain musical ideas in the form of a composition.<sup>43</sup> Sometimes, such details whose final place is in question find a place in other compositions, in keeping with Kurtág’s general practice of building a network of references of his musical ideas in his complete oeuvre.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the phrase ‘végleges’ [final/final version] appears frequently, often with exclamation marks, but this no way implies that the excerpt considered final is actually the final form.<sup>45</sup> It is telling and points to Kurtág’s uncertainty, which is, of course, not unknown to other composers, as to when a work reaches its final form, whether it can reach that form at all, that there are such formulations in the sketches like ‘quasi végleges’ [quasi final version],<sup>46</sup> ‘majdnem végleges’ [almost final version],<sup>47</sup> ‘végleges lehet’ [it can be the final version].<sup>48</sup> The same is true for the use of the expression ‘majdnem kész’ [almost ready].<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the word ‘vége’ [the end] is found many times in the sketches, indicating that for Kurtág, the task of closing a work is by no means an easy one.

Coincidentally, in one sketch of the *Kafka-Fragmente*, even the term ‘a végleges vége’ [the final version’s end] appears.<sup>50</sup>

There is a reference to the final movement (Epilogue), ‘the end’ of *Troussova* (‘*За всё*’/‘For everything’) in one of Kurtág’s sketches which exemplifies another characteristic of Kurtág’s compositional practice. At the bottom of the page it says: ‘és ez lehet az egész darab vége!!!!!! ezt a darabot vállalom. Kurtág György alkoholista’ [and this can be the end of the whole piece!!!!!! I undertake this piece. György Kurtág, alcoholic].<sup>51</sup> The distancing irony of the signature, here referring to his alcohol issues, is a frequently recurring form in Kurtág’s dialogues with himself. This kind of self-deprecation and humour is necessary, if only because the process of composing is not a simple task for Kurtág. In one of his sketches—presumably for an unfinished *Kyrie*<sup>52</sup>—he notes the following: ‘azt szeretném, ha holnap [illegible] egy részt szent őrületben írnék meg (frenезy)’ [Tomorrow, I would like to write a piece in holy madness (frenезy)].<sup>53</sup> But the status of ‘holy madness’ is very difficult to achieve. To put it another way: easy composition is a blessed state. It is much more common that composing becomes almost insurmountably difficult. There are several references to this in the notes. In one sketch, the word ‘paralíz’ [paralysis] is used to describe the composer’s state of mind.<sup>54</sup> In another, Kurtág recalls the ironic tone of István Bálint, the poet of the *Four Capriccios* Op. 9 (1969–1970): ‘Nem kell érzéstelenítés a harakirihez!’ [No anesthesia is needed for hara-kiri!],<sup>55</sup> which means the process of composing is painful, requiring ruthless self-sacrifice and self-denial; creation is like *seppuku*. Nevertheless, a peculiar observation can also be made about the proportion of notes and musical sketches of a work: the less progress Kurtág makes in composing a piece, the more notes he writes in his sketches. This is clearly documented in the vast amount of notes written for the unfinished piano concerto, *Confessio*,<sup>56</sup> but also in the sketches for the similarly unfinished *24 antifona* for orchestra.<sup>57</sup>

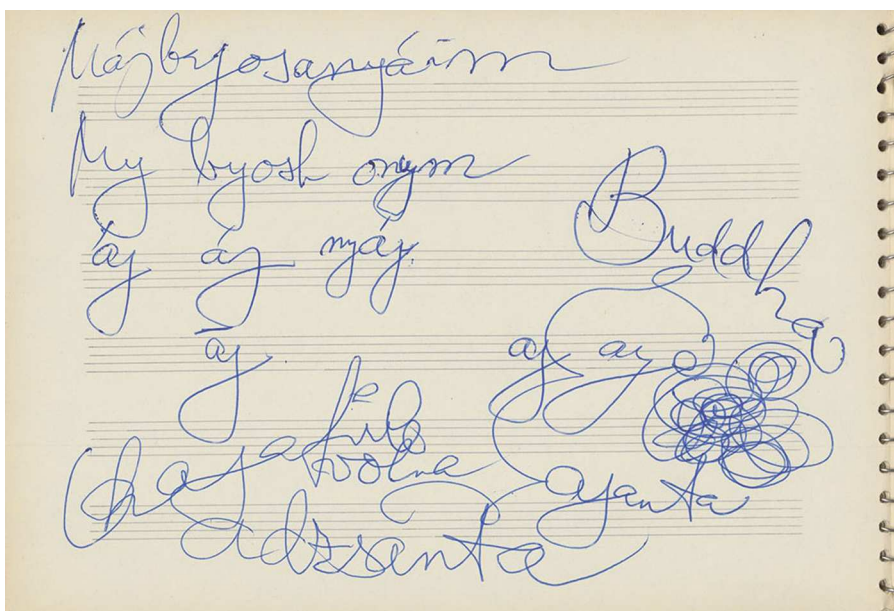
Humour, which often manifests itself in language games, helps relax and relieve the spasms that hinder compositional work. For example, Kurtág wrote a little rhyming poem in two lines at the bottom of a page also based on self-irony to help him relax: ‘Kurtág Gyuri nagyon okos, szereti a Jeromos Bosch-t’ [Gyuri Kurtág is very clever, he likes Hieronymus Bosch].<sup>58</sup> A wordplay encouraged by a musical sound, the realisation of the sounds of a shofar (in Hungarian: sófár) plays a similar role: ‘Sóvár Showar Showar Key-Show-War’ [Yearning Shofar Showar Lustful].<sup>59</sup> The last two words are cross-lingual wordplay: the slight change in consonant from ‘Shofar’ to ‘Showar’ connects it to ‘Key-Show-War’, an English phoneticisation of a Hungarian word (kéjsóvár/lustful). For a piano piece (*Aufschwung-Ligatura*) written for pianist Klára Körmendi for right hand only, Kurtág repeatedly records as a subtitle: ‘avagy: Hogyan tegyük szert könnyen, játszva tartós inhévelygyulladásra’ [or: How to get a long-lasting tendonitis easily by playing].<sup>60</sup>

However, it is not only the (self-)ironic and humorous notes that help ease the tension. Drawings appear even more often than funny comments in many of his sketchbooks. These drawings are more like doodles: Kurtág mechanically draws circles. In many cases, these drawings can take up entire sketchbooks.<sup>61</sup> These non-figurative drawings are clear documents of the shorter or longer periods when something is blocking the process of composition. This is confirmed by the fact that it is not uncommon for these



**Figure 4.** Sketchbook 16, György Kurtág Collection, Paul Sacher Stiftung, MF 0739.

scribbles to start from notes and to run off into infinity; the curvature of the letters is transformed into a circular movement of the hand (Figures 4 and 5). Elsewhere, vocabulary is similarly used to relieve the tension of composing: in an almost time-wasting, procrastinating way, Kurtág jots down a multitude of words for each letter of the alphabet in a dictionary-like manner.<sup>62</sup>



**Figure 5.** Sketchbook 16, György Kurtág Collection, Paul Sacher Stiftung, MF 0758.

## Formal Considerations

Although there are also plenty of notes on orchestration in the sketches and in the sketch-books,<sup>63</sup> and Kurtág's attention occasionally turns to harmonic issues as well,<sup>64</sup> the most significant number of the notes among the sketches deal with formal questions regarding the work in progress. The extent to which Kurtág thinks in terms of traditional formal concepts when he composes is striking. Not only does he use the traditional, classical formal elements by name—in addition to the aforementioned secondary and closing themes and their abbreviations ('melléktéma'/'m.t.', 'zárótéma'/'z.t.'/'zt.'), the terms exposition ('expoziáció'), main theme ('főtéma'), recapitulation ('visszatérés'), trio ('trio') or interlude ('közjáték') also appear in his sketches—, but he also regularly uses terms such as variation/variant ('variáció', 'variáns'), thematic ('tematikus'), weaving further ('tovább szövés'), elaboration ('kidolgozás'), presenting a theme ('exponál').<sup>65</sup>

Having a vision of the structure is essential, especially for longer, multi-movement works. In one of his many sketches of an unfinished violin-cello-piano trio,<sup>66</sup> he even spelled it out clearly in writing, although it is surprising that he is immediately lost in the details while emphasising the primacy of the formal design:

(3) A formai lefolyás terve még sürgősebb mint a részletes kidolgozás. Sematikusan: expoziáció 3 belépés nagytercekben—vagy 4 belépés—(zongora basszussal) kistercekben. talán a 3 belépés elég. (4) Mik legyenek a továbbmenés és a kontrasztálás módjai: Részben adva vannak a kezdés flageolett sóhajaiban—IV vonósnégyes con sordino scherzója lehet az egyik minta. A sablón persze a Mendelssohon scherzók—de hát már az V Brandenburgi III tétele ismeri—egyáltalán: ez volt az első minták között:

De hát először is: mi történjen az expoziáció után?

(3) The plan for the formal organisation is even more urgent than the detailed design. Schematically: exposition in 3 entrances in major thirds—or 4 entrances—(bass in the piano part) in minor thirds. perhaps 3 entrances are enough. (4) What should be the modes of continuation and contrast: They are partly given in the opening of the flageolet sighs—the con sordino scherzo of the Fourth String Quartet could be a model the models are, of course, the Mendelssohn scherzi—but the third movement of the Fifth Brandenburg [Concerto] has already known it: it was among the first models.

But first, what should happen after the exposition?<sup>67</sup>

In fact, the note only describes the specifics of the exposition, leaving open the question of what happens in the subsequent parts. No sooner does Kurtág note his ideas about the structure of the exposition than his attention is distracted to another part of the piece, probably a scherzo, the models of which are Bartók's Fourth String Quartet, Mendelssohn's scherzi and Bach's Fifth *Brandenburg Concerto*. The 'plan for the formal organisation' takes back seat almost immediately to the ideas for the 'detailed design', and Kurtág must remind himself to return to his original train of thought ('But first, what should happen after the exposition?').

One densely filled sheet of sketches written for ... *Quasi una fantasia* ... discusses the formal structure of the work in detail (Figure 6). A formal plan for the planned last movements of the work can be read on both the left and the right sides of the page. Here we can see that what ultimately became a four-movement work (1. Introduzione, 2. Presto minaccioso e lamentoso, 3. Recitativo, 4. Aria—Adagio molto) was originally conceived as a six-movement composition.



movements. The ‘rag rug’-like fifth movement – the word ‘rongyszőnyeg’ is a reference to Sándor Weöres’s cycle of 160 poems with the same title<sup>68</sup> and to the potpourri-like structure of the movement at the same time—guides the music to the end of the work (sixth movement).

The form’s description on the right side of the sheet points to other features of the planned four final movements. Some references to the *Three Old Inscriptions* Op. 25 (1986) appear here: one from the second song, the beginning of the ‘Transylvanian Székely Mangle 1792’ with the text ‘adál az úrnak’ [you give to the Lord], and one in Russian (‘В тюрьме’ [In prison]), which recalls the image of a jail where the scene takes place. There are also references to other quotations from Kurtág’s own ‘Szöcskevalcer’ from *Játékok*<sup>69</sup> and from Bartók’s Violin Concerto. The description of the form also suggests that the third, fourth and fifth movements are variations, while the sixth movement is a ‘coda’. There is one more note in the sheet, which refers to the self-quotations in the piece: ‘8 IV Mi maradt ki ebből? Talán a Kafka-Boulez anyagok—használni lehet mindig—de hol exponálom? Persze: kell-e? A Codában van is helye—de ott diatonikusnak jó lenne az előző krom-ra utalni’ [April 8 What is left out of this? Perhaps the Kafka-Boulez materials—these can be used always—though where can I expose it? Of course: should I? There is a place for it in the Coda—but it must be diatonic there[,] it would be useful to refer to the previous chromatic one]. The ‘Kafka-Boulez materials’ belong to ‘Der Wahre Weg’-movement of the *Kafka-Fragmente*, which was dedicated as a ‘homage-message’ to Pierre Boulez. Kurtág mentions this musical material in his sketches many times, not only as ‘Der Wahre Weg’, but also as the ‘Boulez darab’ [the Boulez piece].<sup>70</sup> All this clearly shows that for Kurtág, the preliminary formulation of ‘the formal organisation’ only partially touches on the structural-formal characteristics of the planned composition, which, according to the author’s intention, usually unfolds in traditional frameworks. Not only does the concept of a blocklike sectional structure play a decisive role in the conceptualised form, but so does the pairing of musical ideas and (self-)quotations.

Besides the ‘formal organisation’ built on sections, it is the scene-like structure of the music and the theatrical gestures which, according to the notes, are of great importance in the compositional process. Kurtág often expresses the succession of musical events in an artistic, almost literary language, using poetic images. This is particularly true of the manuscript material of the Double Concerto and the unfinished piano concerto, *Confessio*, which was being prepared at the same time, and which contains a very large number of descriptions of such plots. One of them describes one ‘scene’ of the violoncello: ‘alatta Vc. nyugtalanul [*sic*] hánykolódik a C körüli ágyában. Aztán, ha lehet, lehangol’ [below him [i.e. the piano] the violoncello is tossing restlessly in its bed which is around the tone C. Then, if possible, it goes down].<sup>71</sup> In another sketch: ‘(Vc) Folterstück: agy mosás—megpróbálja megtanulni az előző diktált formulákat—dadogva—túl folyamatosan etc’ [(Violoncello) Folterstück: brainwashing—he tries to learn the formulas dictated previously—stutteringly—too steadily and so on].<sup>72</sup> And a very similar one for the piano in the sketches for *Confessio*: ‘végigénekelni a frázist, mintha folytatódna—a következő hang helyett—kimerevített szünet az utolsó hangot idő előtt nem elvágni; főleg nem hangsúlyozni!!!’ [The phrase must be sung through, as if it would go on—instead of the following sound—frozen break the last tone shouldn’t be cut off prematurely; especially it shouldn’t be stressed!!!].<sup>73</sup>

Such descriptions mix poetic images, scenes of imaginary actors, and musical phenomena. They also show that Kurtág is often very theatrical in his thinking, even in his instrumental works.<sup>74</sup> And while these notes probably serve at once both as reminders, i.e. memos, as their function is to help the composer's memory remember how he imagined a particular part of a movement or piece, and as a psychological support in the struggle with the superego and the difficulties of composing, they also reveal a great deal about the gestures and scene-like musical events that dominate Kurtág's music. In fact, this is the primary purpose of studying the notes preserved in the sketches. Although Kurtág sees the compositional process as 'a strictly private affair' (Kurtág 2009, 34)—in this respect, it is even legitimate to ask whether it is appropriate to study and make public these intimate notes—the study of his sketches and, within them, of the notes, leads to a deeper understanding of his creative and artistic nature, and, perhaps even more importantly, of his works.

## Notes

1. MF 0318: Sketchbooks nos. 1–20, MF 0319: Sketchbook nos. 21–43, MF 0320: Sketchbooks nos. 44–70. MF stands for microfilm. All archival sources cited in this study are from the György Kurtág collection of the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel, Switzerland.
2. MF 0312, MF 0313, MF 0314.
3. MF 0314: besides *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*, op. 8, MF 0314: op. 9–17, MF 0316: op. 18–24, MF 0317: op. 25–29, MF 0321: op. 30a–40.
4. MF 0318 (Sketchbook 4): 0145–0165.
5. MF 0315: from 0194 onwards.
6. MF 0320 (Sketchbook 46): 0190, MF 0321: 0100, 0705, 0715. There are performance instructions in English: in MF 0316: 0050, 0099, 0103.
7. Romanian: MF 0315: 0285, MF 0317: 0701, Latin: 0318 (Sketchbook 13): 0480–0485 (passages from *Song of Songs*), 0769, English: MF 0315: 0397.
8. For example in the sketches of the Double Concerto: MF 0317: 0416, 0420, 0448, 0707, 0711.
9. MF 0317: 0577, 0602, 0648.
10. MF 0318 (Sketchbook 9): 0360.
11. MF 0320 (Sketchbook 59): 0877.
12. MF 0320 (Sketchbook 59): 0876.
13. MF 0317: 0530. See also Ligeti's name on: MF 0318 (Sketchbook 19): 0939, MF 0320 (Sketchbook 45): 0094, (Sketchbook 52): 0484, (Sketchbook 59): 0890, MF 0321: 0588, 0896, MF 0315: 0271, 0873, 0875.
14. Stockhausen: MF 0319 (Sketchbook 24): 0192, Boulez: MF 0317: 0299, MF 0320 (Sketchbook 55): 0639, MF 0315: 0271.
15. MF 0318 (Sketchbook 15): 0676, 0682.
16. MF 0315: 0352.
17. MF 0317: 0280.
18. MF 0318 (Sketchbook 14): 0544.
19. Tobias Bleek uses the word 'reservoir' in connection with the monstrous piano piece Kurtág wrote in Paris, in 1957 (Bleek 2010, 88).
20. This is the main topic of Bleek's monography (2010). See also: Farkas (2002).
21. MF 0318 (Sketchbook 15): 0632.
22. MF 0317: 0439.
23. MF 0317: 0283.
24. MF 0317: 0728.
25. MF 0319 (Sketchbook 39): 0947.
26. MF 0315: 0052–0053.

27. MF 0316: 0635-0636.
28. MF 0316: 0635.
29. MF 0316: 0635.
30. MF 0318 (Sketchbook 12): 0461, MF 0319 (Sketchbook 40): 0940, MF 0320 (Sketchbook 50): 0319, (Sketchbook 53): 0505, (Sketchbook 54): 0566, (Sketchbook 55): 0602, (Sketchbook 60): 0915.
31. MF 0318 (Sketchbook 18): 0882.
32. MF 0317: 0316.
33. MF 0317: 0319.
34. MF 0318 (Sketchbook 15): 0629.
35. MF 0320 (Sketchbook 50): 0337.
36. Two titles: *A hangok ömlenek a zongorából* [The Sounds Pour from the Piano], *Íme hát megleltem hazámat* [Behold I Have Found My Land, see Vernon Watkins's translation: <https://www.mathstat.dal.ca/~lukacs/ja/poems2/jozsef-eng.htm#21>], and a quotation: 'Fecseg a feleszín' [The chatter / Of the surface] A Dunánál [By the Danube, see John Székely's translation: <https://www.mathstat.dal.ca/~lukacs/ja/poems2/jozsef-eng.htm#16>]. (Last accessed December 12, 2024). MF 0316: 0641, MF 0315: 0320, MF 0315: 0251.
37. MF 0317: 0288.
38. See MF 0317: 0561, 0688, 1759, MF 0320 (Sketchbook 44): 0015, MF 0318 (Sketchbook 10): 0365. The latter's first half, 'Hát ezt akartad' might be a hidden reference to Attila József's last poem written before his suicide in October 1937, *Karóval jöttél* [You came with a stake] in which the line 'híres vagy, hogyha ezt akartad' [you are famous if it's that you desired] appears.
39. MF 0317: 0303.
40. MF 0317: 0561, 0688, 0759, MF 0318 (Sketchbook 15): 0638, 0685, 0688, (Sketchbook 10): 0365, MF 0320 (Sketchbook 44): 0015, (Sketchbook 50): 0337, (Sketchbook 62): 1055.
41. MF 0317: 0289.
42. MF 0316: 0987.
43. See for example: MF 0315: 0088, 0375, MF 0317: 0544, 0560, 0562; MF 0318 (Sketchbook 9): 0321, (Sketchbook 17): 0939; MF 0320 (Sketchbook 51): 0404.
44. For example: 'hová': MF 0317: 0544, 0560, 0562, 'mikor': MF 0317: 0544, 'hogyan': MF 0544, MF 0318 (Sketchbook 9): 0321, MF 0320 (Sketchbook 51): 0404, MF 0315: 0088, 0375.
45. MF 0317: 0500, MF 0319 (Sketchbook 35): 0697, (Sketchbook 40): 0949, 0968, MF 0320 (Sketchbook 46): 0156, MF 0316: 1028.
46. MF 0317: 0510.
47. MF 0317: 0757.
48. MF 0320 (Sketchbook 56): 0654.
49. MF 0320 (Sketchbook 44): 0065.
50. MF 0317: 0169.
51. MF 0320 (Sketchbook 44): 0034.
52. MF 0318 (Sketchbook 16): 0768, MF 0319: 0088, MF 0320 (Sketchbook 52): 0495, (Sketchbook 58): 0846.
53. MF 0318 (Sketchbook 16): 0768. Kurtág misspells the word 'frenzy', presumably contaminating it with the Italian version (frenesia).
54. MF 0319 (Sketchbook 29): 0441.
55. MF 0318 (Sketchbook 12): 0461.
56. Most of the sketch material for the piano concerto *Confessio* can be found here: MF 0316: 0631-0842.
57. See the sketch material here: MF 0315: 0194-0468.
58. MF 0315: 0231. The rhyming game unfortunately cannot be translated.
59. MF 0320 (Sketchbook 61): 0963.
60. MF 0320 (Sketchbook 44): 0075, (Sketchbook 45): 0161, 0162.
61. The PSS's Kurtág Collection keeps a large number of sheets and notebooks containing drawings and doodles. See also: MF 0317: 0253-0256, 0392-0401, 0516-0531.



62. MF 0318 (Sketchbook 14): 0600, (Sketchbook 17): 0790-0794.
63. MF 0317: 0244, 0245, 0247, 0765, 0773, 0954, MF 0319 (Sketchbook 35): 0725, (Sketchbook 38): 0856, (Sketchbook 39): 0888, MF 0315: 0007, 0052-0053, 0068, 0183, 0274-0275, 0278, 0345, 0401, 0633-0634, 0637, 0757.
64. MF 0317: 0351, 0421, 0572, MF 0318 (Sketchbook 15): 0630-0631, MF 0319 (Sketchbook 37): 0806, MF 0320 (Sketchbook 50): 0337, (Sketchbook 51): 0421, (Sketchbook 53): 0523-0525, (Sketchbook 58): 0845-0846, (Sketchbook 59): 0867, 0877, (Sketchbook 61): 0970, MF 0315: 0003, 0245, 0270, 0780, MF 0316: 0018.
65. ‘Expozíció’: MF 0318 (Sketchbook 15): 0631, 0662, 0676, ‘főtéma’: MF 0315: 0245, ‘visszatérés’: MF 0317: 0707, MF 0318 (Sketchbook 18): 0877, MF 0315: 0224, 0353, 0869, ‘trió’: MF 0318 (Sketchbook 16): 0767, MF 0320 (Sketchbook 44): 0010, ‘közjáték’: MF 0317: 0648, MF 0319: 0445, MF 0320 (Sketchbook 48): 0230, MF 0315: 0869, MF 0316: 0787, ‘variáció’/‘variáns’: MF 0317: 0272, 0297, 0299, 0476, 0488, 0502, 0513, MF 0318 (Sketchbook 7): 0268, (Sketchbook 8): 0319, (Sketchbook 16): 0773, (Sketchbook 18): 0882, MF 0320 (Sketchbook 48): 0260, (Sketchbook 51): 0415, (Sketchbook 57): 0766, (Sketchbook 61): 0980, 0997, (Sketchbook 62): 1037, (Sketchbook 68): 1242, MF 0321: 0266, 0320, 0688, 0757, 0787, 0912, ‘tematikus’: MF 0315: 0242, 0345, ‘szöveg’: MF 0317: 0304, 0536, MF 0318: 0304, 0630, 0643, 0814, MF 0319 (Sketchbook 40): 0979, ‘kidolgozás’: MF 0317: 0249, 0491, 0631, ‘exponál’: MF 0317: 0299, 0597, 0719, MF 0315: 0353.
66. See for example: MF 0318 (Sketchbook 15): 0630-0685.
67. MF 0318 (Sketchbook 15): 0631-0632.
68. First published in his collection of poems: *Medúza* (Weöres 1943).
69. *Játékok* Vol. 5 no. 35b, with the title: Valcer (az áhítatos szöcske avagy a szelidített imádkozó sáska) [Waltz (the devout grasshopper or the tamed praying mantis)].
70. MF 0316: 0987, 1045, MF 0320 (Sketchbook 55): 0639, MF 0315: 0271.
71. MF 0317: 0674.
72. MF 0317: 0393.
73. MF 0320 (Sketchbook 58): 0799.
74. The question of the ‘theatricality’ of Kurtág’s music is discussed in detail in Williams (2002), Zenck (2002).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on Contributor

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