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Viola Fragments: Contextualizing and Interpreting Selections from György Kurtág's Signs, Games and Messages

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**VIOLA FRAGMENTS:
CONTEXTUALIZING AND INTERPRETING SELECTIONS FROM GYÖRGY
KURTÁG'S *SIGNS, GAMES AND MESSAGES***

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts

in

The College of Musical and Dramatic Arts

by
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ABSTRACT

The viola came to prominence as a solo instrument relatively late compared to the violin and cello. As a result, the standard repertoire is more recent, consisting largely of twentieth century works. The standard repertoire continues to expand as new works are written and embraced by performers. One such work is the Hungarian composer György Kurtág's open ended collection of pieces for solo viola *Signs, Games and Messages* (1987-). Kurtág, born in 1926, is one of the most important composers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. His music is characterized by its brevity, fragmentation, ambiguity, and intertextuality. The painstaking scrutiny Kurtág applies to his own compositions results in a dense web of musical and extramusical references. Although Kurtág only achieved international acclaim late in his career, he has since been recognized as a profound and influential voice in Hungarian music and in contemporary music more broadly. *Signs, Games, and Messages*, an important contribution to the literature for unaccompanied viola, is a collection of short pieces that exemplifies many of Kurtág's stylistic traits. This paper will examine eight of these works that represent a cross-section of the composer's tendencies: *Jelek II*, *Perpetuum mobile*, *Panaszos nóta*, *The Carenza Jig*, *Hommage à John Cage*, *In memoriam Blum Tamás*, *Kroó György in memoriam*, and *Samuel Beckett: le nain*. Due in part to the brevity of these pieces, their full context and meaning are not readily apparent, requiring close examination on the part of the performer. Through comparison with Kurtág's other works, biographical study, and musical analysis, these pieces can be better understood and performed.

INTRODUCTION

Kurtág was born in 1926 in an area that had been ceded from Hungary to Romania before his birth. He moved to Budapest in 1946 and gained his Hungarian citizenship. In Budapest, Kurtág studied at the Franz Liszt Academy, where he earned degrees in piano, chamber music, and composition. Due to the Soviet occupation of Hungary, most music from western Europe, especially atonal or “formalist” music, was scarcely available in Hungary.¹ Kurtág's music from this time period is influenced by the music of Bartók and fits the socialist-realist aesthetic expected of Hungarian composers under Soviet occupation.²

Change came with the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, which shook the Soviet control of Hungary.³ Movement outside of Hungary became restricted, leading some composers to leave Hungary altogether.⁴ Such was the case for Kurtág's dear friend György Ligeti, whom he had met at the Liszt Academy.⁵ Kurtág experienced a deep personal crisis following the Hungarian Revolution and left Hungary for one year to study in Paris in 1957. During this year, he worked with art psychologist Marianne Stein, who remained influential to him throughout his life.⁶ His 1989 work *Grabstein für Stephan* op. 15c was written in memory of Marianne Stein's husband.⁷ Kurtág was also exposed to modernist music that had not been available in Hungary, especially

1 Rachel Beckles Willson, “Kurtág, György,” *Grove Music Online*, 2001, accessed 3 January, 2020. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000015695>.

2 Ibid.

3 Rachel Beckles Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music During the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 77-78.

4 Ibid., 77.

5 Richard Toop, *György Ligeti* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1999), 24.

6 Balint Andras Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 6.

7 Alan E. Williams, “Kurtág, Modernity, Modernisms,” *Contemporary Music Review* 20 (2001): 64.

the works of Webern. After returning to Hungary, he wrote his String Quartet op. 1, which is considered his first mature work.⁸ The socialist-realist aesthetic of Kurtág's earlier works gave way to a fragmented, gestural musical idiom that would have been denounced as formalism prior to 1956. The String Quartet bears some superficial resemblance to the music of Webern in its brevity and selective use of serialism.⁹ Until the completion of *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza* op. 7 for soprano and piano in 1968, Kurtág wrote short instrumental pieces with few apparent extramusical references.¹⁰ *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza* marks the end of Kurtág's early period.

Following the lengthy and substantial *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza*, Kurtág experienced a period of difficulty in composition that he described as a period of paralysis.¹¹ This phase lasted until 1973, when he was approached by piano teacher Marianne Teöke to write piano pieces for children. This request was the impetus for Kurtág's ongoing collection of piano pieces titled *Játékok* (Games). *Játékok* proved to be a powerful creative outlet for Kurtág. The intense scrutiny he applied to his other works was relaxed in these pieces.¹² *Játékok* also represented a merging of Kurtág as a composer, teacher, and performer as he and his wife Marta Kurtág performed the pieces in Hungary after their completion.¹³ In *Játékok*, Kurtág explored different types of pieces with elements of humor, play, and theatricality, as well as homages and memorial pieces. From 1973 until approximately 1988, Kurtág wrote primarily

8 Willson, "Kurtág, György," *Grove Music Online*.

9 Péter Halász, "On Kurtág's Dodecaphony," *Studia Musicologica Scientiarum Hungaricae* T. 43 (2002): 236-237, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/902586>.

10 Williams, "Kurtág, Modernity, Modernisms," 55.

11 Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 6.

12 Stephen Walsh, "György Kurtág: An Outline Study (II)," *Tempo* no. 142 (September 1982): 11, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/944812>.

13 Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music*, 156-157.

vocal works. Though he was highly regarded in Hungary, it was not until the premiere of *Messages of the Late Miss R. V. Trousova* op. 17 in 1981 in Paris that Kurtág's impact extended internationally.¹⁴

From 1988 on, Kurtág again wrote significant instrumental works for larger ensembles, while achieving greater recognition and success.¹⁵ *Signs, Games, and Messages* was begun in the later 1980s. In addition to the viola version, Kurtág wrote versions for string trio, violin, cello, and several other instruments. Each version is substantially different with different amounts of pieces, as well as alternate versions of pieces that are shared between versions. Many of the pieces in the viola version were written between 1987 and 1991, though some were written before and after this time period. Like *Játékok*, *Signs, Games and Messages* is an open-ended work. Performers may decide how many pieces to play and in what order.¹⁶ This paper will examine eight pieces from *Signs, Games, and Messages*: *Jelek II*, *Perpetuum Mobile*, *Panaszos nóta*, *The Carenza Jig*, *Hommage à John Cage*, *In memoriam Blum Tamás*, *Kroó György in memoriam*, and *Samuel Beckett: le nain*. These pieces can be split into four categories. Each of these categories represents a major element of Kurtág's style over his career. *Jelek II* represents Kurtág's early style. *Perpetuum mobile*, *Panaszos nóta*, and *The Carenza Jig* represent game-like pieces influenced by *Játékok*. *Hommage à John Cage*, *In memoriam Blum Tamás*, and *Kroó György in memoriam* are homages and memorial pieces. Finally, *Samuel Beckett: le nain* represents works with text.

¹⁴ Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 116.

¹⁵ Willson, "Kurtág, György," *Grove Music Online*.

¹⁶ Tim Rutherford-Johnson, *Music After the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture Since 1989*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017): 174.

CHAPTER ONE: JELEK II

One of the few works produced in Kurtág's early period was *Jelek* (Signs) op. 5, a brief six movement work for solo viola written and published in 1961. Movements from *Jelek* were later revised for inclusion in versions of *Signs, Games and Messages*. *Jelek II* appears in both the solo viola and string trio versions. *Jelek I* also appears in the solo viola version, and *Jelek VI* appears in the string trio version. In the context of *Signs, Games and Messages*, movements from *Jelek* represent Kurtág's early style directly following his time in Paris.¹⁷

Although works prior to *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza*, op. 7, are less directly intertextual and referential than later works, they are still indebted to works of the past, such as Bartók and Webern.¹⁸ Kurtág's time spent in Paris and the deep personal crisis he experienced are reflected in these early pieces, as is the influence of Webern and Marianne Stein. While in Paris, Kurtág copied out Webern's entire catalog by hand, providing an intimate knowledge of his music.¹⁹ Stein also influenced Kurtág's compositional process by instructing him to “work from the simplest and most elementary materials towards a precise expression of the generating idea.”²⁰ Another influence from this time in Paris was visual art. In an interview, he describes using cigarette butts and matchsticks to make “signs” that held a deep symbolic meaning. From this approach, he created the program for his String Quartet op. 1: “The cockroach seeks a way to the light,” in which Kurtág considered himself to be the cockroach.²¹

The socialist-realist aesthetic of his earlier works is replaced with the dissonant, gestural

17 Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 139.

18 Williams, “Kurtág, Modernity, Modernisms,” 55.

19 Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 6.

20 Stephen Walsh, “György Kurtág: An Outline Study I,” *Tempo* no 140 (March 1982), 12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/944833>.

21 Varga, *György Kurtág, Three Interviews*, 6.

language of the post-Webernian avant-garde.²² Kurtág describes making drawings of his matchstick images as a means of preserving them when the time came to clean his room, and setting the drawings to music in his *Eight Piano Pieces* op 3. He engaged in a similar process in his period of paralysis before beginning *Játékok*.²³ In a later interview, Kurtág discusses filling countless notebooks with signs before writing *Játékok* and the intangible and abstract meaning they held for him: “It is also likely that in producing the India ink images, I was hoping that in music I would sometime be able to do better than I was eventually capable of. I still think the same today when I look at the ink drawings ... I don't know.”²⁴

Jelek II was revised for the solo viola version of *Signs, Games and Messages* in 1992, and again 2005.^{25 26} Notes and rhythms are unchanged in the revision, although Kurtág adds specificity in his notation through dotted lines, barlines, and metronome markings. In other early works, he conceived of musical gestures as poetic feet, groups of stressed and unstressed syllables. The opening to his String Quartet op. 1 is a dactyl, three syllables in which the first is stressed.²⁷ *Jelek I* begins with a trochee, one stressed and one unstressed syllable. The dotted lines and accents in *Jelek II* signify poetic feet in the first and last measures. The first two notes of the piece are a trochee, followed by a dactyl in the next three notes. In the final measure of the piece, Kurtág's phrasing markings rather than accents denote dactyls and trochees.

22 Willson, “Kurtág, György,” *Grove Music Online*.

23 Varga, *György Kurtág, Three Interviews*, 7-8.

24 *Ibid.*, 17.

25 György Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages for Viola*, (Budapest: Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest, 2005), 5.

26 Varga, *György Kurtág, Three Interviews*, 139.

27 Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music*, 93-94.

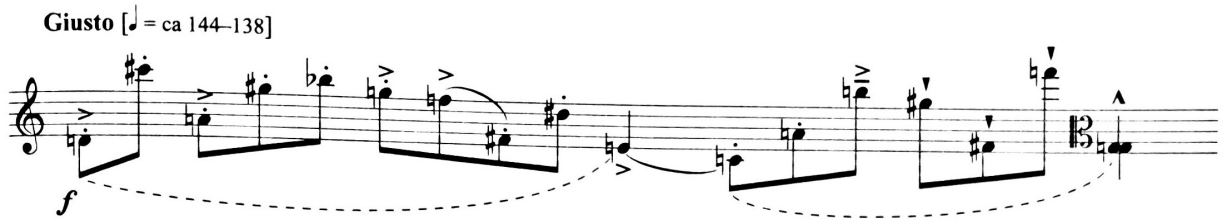


Figure 1: Kurtág: *Jelek II*, mm.1, showing groups of accented and unaccented notes, © Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by permission.²⁸

Although *Jelek II* is not written in a traditional meter, the addition of barlines in the revision create the sense of upbeats and downbeats. The first barline comes between two eighth notes, implying an upbeat followed by a downbeat. At the end of the piece, the barline between the rest and the first note of the following phrase implies a clear downbeat.

Other revisions are more ambiguous. The dotted lines under the slurs in the second phrase create two groups of six notes, as well as a bracketed group of four notes in the middle which includes notes from both of the six-note groups. Although these markings conflict, a hierarchy is apparent. The slur marking is at the highest tier, followed by the two six note groups, followed by the four note group in brackets. Indeed, the slur marking has the clearest impact on the actual resulting sound of the phrase. Strange or conflicting performance indications such as this appear in Kurtág's other works such as *Prelude and Waltz in C* from the first volume of *Játékok*, in which a crescendo is marked from *pianissimo* to *forte* in one whole note on the piano. Such a musical gesture is physically and technically impossible on the piano.²⁹ These markings place a higher demand on the performer to convey the intention of the gesture to the audience, even when it cannot be literally realized on the instrument. The subtle conflict these ambiguous markings present to the performer may not be literally executed on the

²⁸ György Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages for Viola*, (Budapest: Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest, 2005), 5.

²⁹ Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music*, 153-155.

instrument, but may be an intention set out by Kurtág for the phrase.

Although *Jelek II* does not fit into any conventional musical form, it can be understood as four phrases, each separated by a rest and differentiated by a change in musical material. The opening and closing phrases of the piece are linked through the implication of poetic feet as well as contour, gesture, and pitch content. Both lines are characterized by *forte* staccato eighth notes and large intervallic leaps by dissonant intervals. The first eleven notes of both phrases imply a twelve-tone row inverted in the latter phrase. In both phrases, the twelfth note is a repeated note instead of the one remaining pitch. Each missing pitch is emphasized later in the phrase after some intervening pitches. The complete row is as follows: D, C-sharp, A, G-sharp, B-flat, G, F, F-sharp, D-sharp, E, C, B. Kurtág delays the B in the first phrase by one note. Despite the interruption, the B is emphasized with the only *tenuto* accent of the phrase. The inversion of the row that appears in the final phrase is as follows: D, E-flat, G, G-sharp, A, B, B-flat, D-flat, C, E, F. Again, the final pitch is delayed and emphasized. The F is the final note, as well as the highest pitch of the phrase and is approached by a nearly three octave leap. This fleeting use of serialism appears in Kurtág's other early works in a less strict and pervasive way than the works of Webern or other serial composers.³⁰

The two middle phrases of *Jelek II* contrast with the first and last phrase through dynamics, contour, and timbre. *Pianissimo legato* lines and pizzicato replace the angular staccato notes of the exterior phrases. While the pitch content still emphasizes intervals present in the row such as sevenths and seconds, Kurtág also introduces perfect fourths and fifths. The angularity of the third phrase connects it to the first and last phrase. Instead of dance-like rhythmic figures or poetic feet, Kurtág obscures the rhythm by implying different meters and

30 Halasz, "On Kurtág's Dodecaphony," 236.

offsetting notes with eighth and sixteenth rests.

The string trio version of *Jelek II* was completed in 2000, five years prior to the revision of the viola version. It is significantly different from both the original op. 5 version and the 2005 revision. The foundation of the piece remains the same; every note of the original version appears in at least one voice of the trio version. Kurtág expands on the piece by augmenting phrases, adding countermelodies, and adding different timbres such as Bartók pizzicato and harmonics. This reworking of previous material into a new or somewhat altered piece is common in Kurtág's catalog.³¹

Although *Jelek II* is one of the briefest pieces in *Signs, Games, and Messages* at only approximately 30 seconds in length, it is one of the most technically demanding for the performer due in part to its large intervallic leaps. Two individual moments in the piece also stand out as impractical for the performer. The second sound of the pizzicato phrase is a double-stop G and A dyad displaced by two octaves. Only two options are possible for performing this dyad. Performers may choose to play the two notes on adjacent strings or on nonadjacent strings. In the former scenario, the stopped A on the D string will lack resonance and volume relative to the open G due to the significantly shorter string length. In the latter scenario, plucking the G and A strings without creating an unintended sound from the D string is difficult. At the end of the same phrase, Kurtág alternates between *piano* arco notes and *forte* left hand pizzicato notes. The first pair of these notes, A-sharp and B, present a similar problem due to string length. Arco naturally sounds louder than pizzicato, which is compounded with the far shorter string length of the B, which is a minor ninth above the A-sharp, making accurate

31 Mark Hutchinson, *Coherence in New Music: Experience, Aesthetics, Analysis*, (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2016): 163.

execution of these two notes nearly impossible. By using the right hand to pluck instead of the left hand, the performer will encounter the technical challenge of changing from arco to pizzicato and back very quickly, but may also produce the intended sound more accurately.

Jelek II is emblematic of the density and brevity of Kurtág's early period. While the piece may initially come across as a complex and unrelated collection of sounds, a closer inspection shows a depth of variety and unity. Additionally, Kurtág's incorporation of and reaction to Webern and post-Webernian modernism is displayed through his obscured and fleeting use of serialism, as well as the brevity and difficulty of *Jelek II*.

CHAPTER TWO: *PERPETUUM MOBILE, PANASZOS NÓTA, AND THE CARENZA JIG*

2.1 Background

Other than *Jelek I* and *Jelek II*, all of the pieces of *Signs, Games, and Messages* were written after Kurtág began writing *Játékok*. In addition to helping Kurtág return to composition, *Játékok* broadened his compositional palette. The instructional set of pieces for children focuses on providing physical comfort with the piano without a strong focus on technique, which is indicated explicitly in the performance notes.³² Kurtág's emphasis is on freedom, experimentation, and the pure pleasure of playing the piano without abandoning previous knowledge and musicality in the case of more experienced pianists.³³ In both *Játékok* and *Signs, Games and Messages*, a diagram showing the relative duration of various rhythmic markings is included.³⁴ The theme of freedom is also manifested through Kurtág's broader acceptance of his own compositional ideas in *Játékok*.³⁵

Játékok sets the stage for *Signs, Games, and Messages* not only in its focus on artistic freedom, experimentation, and exploration of ideas. Both collections are built of individual units that can be performed in any combination or collection.³⁶ *Játékok*'s exploration of musical forms and the prevalence of homages and memorial pieces both foreshadow *Signs, Games, and Messages* as well. Elements of theatricality already present in Kurtág's music were also expanded upon in *Játékok* and future works. Although he avoided writing any explicitly

32 Alan E. Williams, "Music Theatre and Presence in Some Works of György Kurtág," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* T. 43 (2002), 361, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/902595>.

33 György Kurtág, *Játékok*, (Budapest: Univeral Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest, 1979), 9.

34 Ibid., 9.

35 Walsh, "György Kurtág: An Outline Study II," 12.

36 Rutherford-Johnson, *Music After the Fall*, 174.

theatrical works until his 2018 opera *Samuel Beckett: Fin de partie*, his instrumental and vocal stage works show a consideration of the theatricality of musicians performing on stage. Soprano Adrienne Csengery, who worked with Kurtág frequently and premiered many of his works, has referred to this theatrical quality, even going so far as to use the term “camouflaged operas” to describe some of his works.³⁷ This can be seen in *Játékok* in pieces in which the pianist is asked to touch the keys without moving them, walk beside the piano, and play with the palms of the hands.³⁸ Other works such as ... *quasi una fantasia* ..., op. 27, and *Grabstein für Stephan*, op. 15C, also explore physical space by distributing musicians in different areas of the performance hall.³⁹

Another precedent was S. K. *Remembrance Noise. Seven Songs to Dezső Tandori's Poems*, op. 12, (1975) for soprano and violin. Tandori's poetry connects op. 12 to *Játékok* through the concept of the *objet trouvé* or “found object.” The term originated in visual art to describe an existing object, such as a shoe or a toilet seat repurposed in a work of art.⁴⁰ Hungarian poets Tandori and Attila József, whose text Kurtág also set, embraced the concept in their poetry. Tandori's volume *The Cleaning of an Objet Trouvé* features minimal poems that toy with poetic forms.⁴¹ For example, “A szonnett” (The sonnet) consists only of one letter per line outlining the rhyme scheme of a typical sonnet and two interjections at the end of each stanza: “(Got stuck on this line)”, “(then did finally continue and complete it)”.⁴² In the context of

37 Williams, “Music Theatre and Presence,” 359.

38 Ibid., 361.

39 Ibid., 367.

40 Gale, Matthew. “Objet trouvé.” *Grove Art Online*. 2003; Accessed 8 Jan. 2020. <https://www-oxfordartonline-com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000063150>.

41 Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music*, 153-155.

42 Ibid., 153.

Kurtág's music, an *objet trouvé* is “pre-existing material, 'discovered' in the structure of an instrument.”⁴³ This translates to simple figures and gestures such as open strings, scales, and idiomatic motifs. Kurtág explicitly indicates that some of the pieces of *Játékok* are *objets trouvés*, directly stating their light, and simple character. One example is *Prelude and Waltz in C*, which evokes the form of a waltz entirely on the single pitch-class C through meter, dynamic, and register.⁴⁴



Figure 2: Kurtág, *Prelude and Waltz in C* from *Játékok* Volume 1, mm.6-19, showing a waltz containing on the pitch C, © Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by permission.⁴⁵

The self-reflective and ironic elements of “A szonnett” are mirrored in *Prelude and Waltz*

43 Rachel Beckles Willson, “Kurtág's Instrumental Music, 1988-1998” *Tempo* no. 207 (2001), 16.

44 Ibid., 154.

45 Kurtág, *Játékok*, 1.

in *C*, which reduces the piece to its bare essentials. A heightened level of commitment is required from performers to offset the simplicity of musical *objets trouvés*. Performers must make art from the found object and convey the irony and meaning to listeners.⁴⁶ S. K.

Remembrance Noise also explores the act of learning to play the violin in its musical material through passages that evoke etudes and technical exercises. The text of the song “So That We Never Get Out of Practice” repeats the same two words “there’s solace” five times with altered and distorted pronunciations while the violin repeats arpeggios without any sense of progress or development.⁴⁷ Both the text and the musical material call attention to a feeling of futility and uncertainty in the act of practicing. Several pieces in *Signs, Games, and Messages* reflect these elements, but they are most clearly reflected in *Perpetuum mobile*, *Panaszos nóta*, and *The Carenza Jig*.

2.2 *Perpetuum mobile*

Perpetuum mobile was written in 1987 and revised in 1991. Prior to *Signs, Games, and Messages*, Kurtág wrote a *Perpetuum mobile* for piano as part of the first volume of *Játékok* and marked it explicitly as an *objet trouvé*.⁴⁸ In contrast to the scales and arpeggios found in a traditional *moto perpetuo*, Kurtág’s piece is an exercise in *glissandi* over the length of the keyboard with only the contour and relative pitch marked in the score.⁴⁹ Although the piece has no definite pitches or rhythms, Kurtág evokes the gesture of a perpetual motion piece through the rapid pace of the glissandi.

46 Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music*, 153-155.

47 Ibid., 157-158.

48 Kurtág, *Játékok*, 1.

49 Tilmouth, Michael. “Moto perpetuo.” *Grove Music Online*. 2001; Accessed 4 Jan. 2020. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo9781561592630-e-0000019224>.

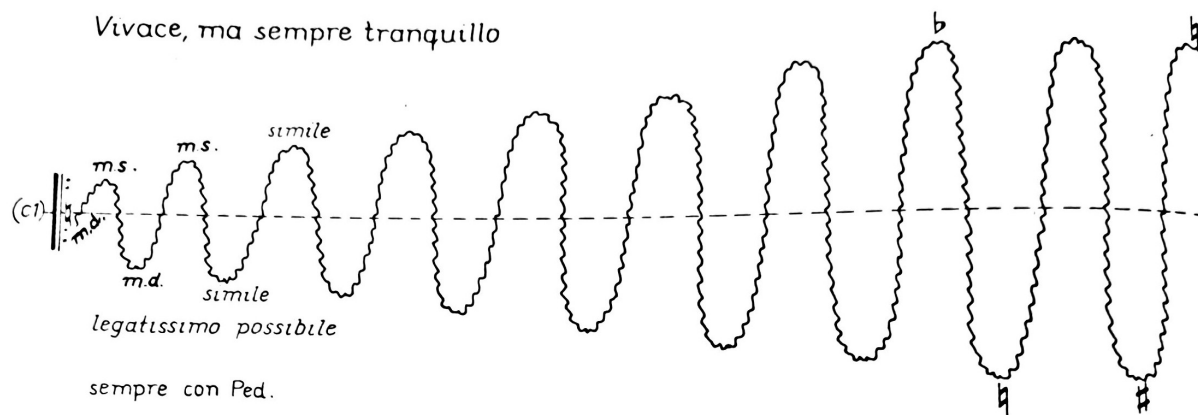


Figure 3: Kurtág, *Perpetuum mobile* from *Játékok*, mm.1, showing Kurtág's glissando notation, © Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by permission.⁵⁰

As with the *Prelude and Waltz in C*, *Perpetuum mobile* for piano clearly references and evokes a musical form with minimal material.

Perpetuum mobile is included in the violin, viola, and string trio editions of *Signs, Games, and Messages*. The violin and viola versions are direct transpositions of one another by perfect fifth, while the string trio version, which was written later in 1995, differs substantially.⁵¹

⁵² All versions of *Perpetuum mobile* share the same basic two part structure of an “Ouverture” followed by a “Perpetuum mobile,” though the internal structure is altered in the trio version, as in *Jelek II*.

The Ouverture explores the theatrical and physical gestures of performance, while representing a typical *objet trouvé*. Its three gestures are separated by silent fermatas with the marking “erstarren” or “freeze.” While the fermatas between gestures would have been sufficient to indicate silence to performers, Kurtág uses evocative language to convey a more gestural, bodily silence. There is a clear trajectory of increasing intensity throughout the

⁵⁰ Kurtág, *Játékok*, 1.

⁵¹ Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages for Viola*, 8-10.

⁵² György Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages for String Trio*, (Budapest: Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest, 2005), 9-11.

Ouverture that is achieved through increasing dynamic, pitch range, and speed. As the performer accelerates and crescendos through the passage, the physical gesture of the string crossings will naturally increase in size and intensity, contrasting with the exaggerated stillness between gestures. The final gesture is to be repeated an indeterminate number of times as the performer accelerates and crescendos, reflecting Kurtág's tendency to relinquish control to his performers as in *Játékok*.

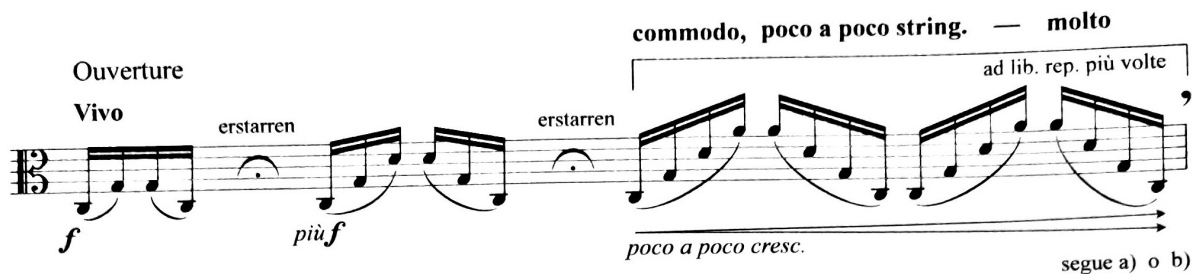


Figure 4: Kurtág, *Perpetuum mobile* from *Signs, Games, and Messages*, mm.1, showing the Ouverture consisting of only open strings, © Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by permission.⁵³

After the Ouverture, the performer may choose to play one of three versions of the *Perpetuum mobile*: a), b), or c). Though the three options differ, they maintain the same structure. Each one consists of four phrases punctuated with a *subito forte* note and a short coda after the final phrase. The a) version is the simplest. The b) version is an elaboration and variation on the a) version. Much of the material is inverted, and a new figure containing alternating major and minor thirds is introduced. Finally, the c) version presents a fusion of the two previous versions. The first and third phrases of c) are taken directly from a), while the second and fourth are taken from b) and slightly altered.

As in the Ouverture, the *Perpetuum mobile* section has elements of an *objet trouvé*. Kurtág writes mostly open strings and perfect intervals, creating an open and consonant sound.

⁵³ Kurtág, *Signs, Games, and Messages for Viola*, 8.

The material is largely composed of repeating fragments transposed and inverted, allowing the performer to use the same fingerings for most passages. This etude-like writing reflects Kurtág's other works such as *S. K. Remembrance Noise*.



Figure 5: Kurtág, *Perpetuum mobile* from *Signs, Games, and Messages*, mm.2-4, showing the prevalence of open strings and string crossings, © Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by permission.⁵⁴

The simplicity of *Perpetuum mobile* combined with the subitio forte interruptions at the end of each phrase parody perpetual motion pieces. Whereas *Perpetuum mobile* for piano gives inexperienced pianists a chance to gain physical comfort with the instrument, *Perpetuum mobile* for viola is deceptively difficult, evoking awkward and uncomfortable string crossing etudes. The piece runs in circles without development of material, embodying the practice frustrations of *S. K. Remembrance Noise*. Though the tonal language of the piece is far more consonant and simple than early works such as *Jelek II*, *Perpetuum mobile* is dense with meaning.

2.3 *Panaszos nóta*

Panaszos nóta or “complaining song” was written in 1987 for solo violin and for solo viola. Kurtág later revised the solo viola version in 1991. Instead of toying with musical forms and tropes, *Panaszos nóta* explores the mechanics of playing the instrument while evoking the human voice. Kurtág's tempo marking “Lento, parlando, molto rubato” instructs the performer to play in a speaking manner, while other elements such as microtonality distort traditional

⁵⁴ Kurtág, *Signs, Games, and Messages for Viola*, 8.

musical sounds into speech-like gestures.⁵⁵

Although the violin and viola versions differ substantially, the former may inform one's understanding of the latter. In parentheses, Kurtág marks the violin version as a vibrato study, showing again an interest in the physical act of playing the instrument. This subtitle implies that the microtonal pitch changes should be accomplished not by changing the location of the finger on the fingerboard, but by rolling the pad of the finger that makes contact with the string, as in vibrato, which is reinforced by the indicated fingerings. For example, Kurtág asks for all of the first measure, in which the pitch is bent up a quarter-tone from F-sharp and back, to be played with the first finger. By slurring these pitches and marking them with the same finger, Kurtág instructs the player to roll the finger up a quarter-tone in what amounts to an exaggerated and notated vibrato. Combined with the glissandi, this effect evokes a whining or crying human voice. Kurtág also uses these techniques in his vocal works, such as *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza* in which the text is “enacted through the singing voice” by way of unconventional writing such as glissandi, barking, and extreme parts of the vocal register.⁵⁶

55 Fallows, David. "Parlando." *Grove Music Online*. 2001; Accessed 4 Jan. 2020. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000020927>.

56 Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music*, 100-101.

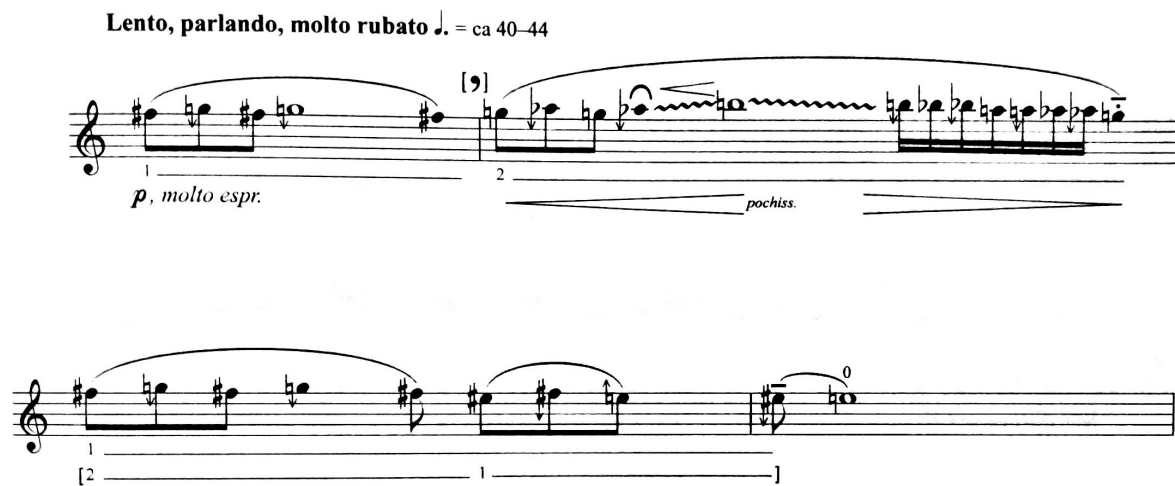


Figure 6: Kurtág, *Panaszos nóta* from *Signs, Games, and Messages*, mm.1-4, showing the exaggerated notated vibrato effect, © Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by permission.⁵⁷

The violin version of *Panaszos nóta* can be divided into two sections that are differentiated by changes in register, timbre and rhythm: the first four measures constitute the first section, and the last four measures constitute the second section. Throughout the piece, the pitch content revolves around half-steps and quarter-steps. *Sul ponticello* and *sul tasto* timbres, as well as a lower pitch range, are featured in the second section, creating a murmuring or mumbling effect that contrasts with the microtonal whining of the first section. Similar pitch material and ranges are used in the viola version but transposed down a perfect fifth to suit the viola's range.

The two sections of the violin version are extended in the viola version, which adds a third section that alternates between *sul ponticello battuto* double-stops and glissandi over wide pitch ranges. Though the use of glissandi in the third section hints at some degree of return to the opening section, the expanded pitch range of the gestures differentiates the two sections. Kurtág omits the vibrato study indication in the viola version as well, though the quasi-

⁵⁷ György Kurtág, *Signs, Games, and Messages for Violin*, (Budapest: Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest, 2005), 9.

vibrato material is still present. Additionally, he uses far more expression and performance indications in the viola version, creating a more vivid and expressive piece. One of the most significant differences between versions is the focus on timbre. Instead of the comfortable first position in the violin version, Kurtág marks the first section of the viola version to be played on the C-string near the end of the fingerboard, creating a sense of strain.

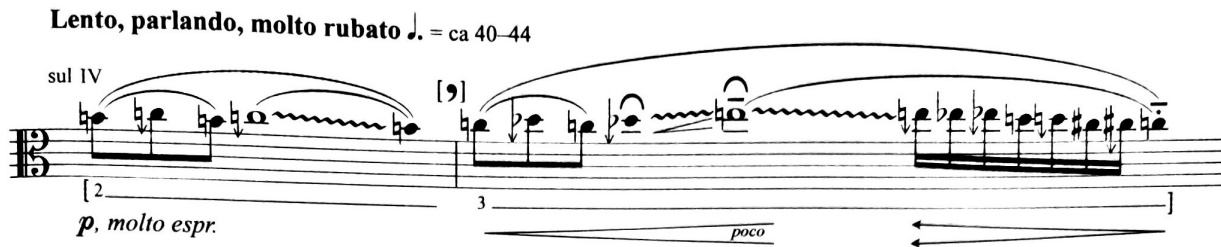


Figure 7: Kurtág, *Panaszos nóta* from *Signs, Games, and Messages*, mm.1-2, showing the difference in markings in the viola version, © Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by permission.⁵⁸

Instead of the easy, comfortable tone in the violin version, the viola version is in the strained, extreme register of the upper C string. In the final section of the viola version, Kurtág revisits the extreme register of the viola on the G and D strings, again bringing a sense of return and closure to the structure of the piece.

This extreme timbre emphasizes the human and vocal qualities of the piece as well. By combining this timbre with microtonality and glissandi Kurtág creates a sound distant from the traditionally resonant viola. The strained, hoarse, and weak sound in the most muffled register of the viola, evokes an breaking human voice crying or moaning. This effect is further exaggerated by the wavy lines indicating vibrato during the glissandi.

A similar timbre is used in the first movement of Ligeti's *Sonata for Solo Viola*, which is played exclusively on the C string and reaches from open C to the C three octaves higher at the

⁵⁸ Kurtág, *Signs, Games, and Messages for Viola*, 11.

very end of string. In the preface to the Sonata, Ligeti describes this movement's allusions to sung Romanian folk songs.⁵⁹ Though Ligeti's Sonata was not performed until three years after the viola version of *Panaszos nóta* was written, the similar use of this register of the viola to evoke the human voice is striking. Whereas Ligeti's Sonata is a more song-like depiction, Kurtág's piece is a more literal depiction of wailing and crying. Paul Griffiths describes this element of Kurtág's music as "released ... from musical syntax."⁶⁰

2.4 The Carenza Jig

The Carenza Jig was written in 1989 for solo violin and solo viola and revised several times. Kurtág wrote the piece for a girl named Carenza, who was the young daughter of a family with whom he was staying in Cornwall. Carenza was learning *Játékok* on the piano and starting to learn violin, prompting Kurtág to write a violin piece for her.⁶¹ *The Carenza Jig* is one of the most straightforward and traditional pieces in *Signs, Games, and Messages*. Kurtág makes consistent use of barlines and specific meters, as opposed to the open-ended measures frequently found in his other solo works. He also avoids silences and pauses apart from one fermata before the final two measures.

The Carenza Jig has a strong rhythmic profile consisting largely of compound meter and some hemiola, creating an allusion to the Jig of the British Isles. For example, the first and third bars are in compound meter, which is contrasted by the three eighth notes of the second and fourth bars, which imply simple meter or hemiola in a compound meter. Despite the occasional rhythmic interruptions and contrasts, the consistency of the compound dotted eighth notes

59 György Ligeti, *Sonata for Viola Solo*, (London: Schott Music, 2001), Preface.

60 Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 153.

61 Simon Smith, "Signs, Games and Messages: Works for Solo Violin by Bartók and Kurtág," Liner notes for *Signs, Games and Messages* by György Kurtág, Nigel Simeone, Resonus RES10167, 2016, compact disc.

sustains the dance feeling throughout the piece, which is reinforced by the use of the term “Jig” in the title of the piece. The rare use of English in the title also refers to England.

Although Kurtág's music is generally ambiguous in terms of form and structure, *The Carenza Jig* has a clear and symmetrical form in keeping with traditional dances. The piece begins with a four measure introduction followed by a ten measure phrase. This process unfolds in reverse in the second half of the piece, which begins with a variation of the previous ten measure phrase and ends with a four measure coda. By contrast the brevity and fragmentation characteristic of Kurtág's music tends to subvert traditional forms in other works. In an interview, he described his relationship with form: “I can't see forms, or even recollect them, but I feel secure in their proximity.”⁶² Despite Kurtág's humility in interviews, his statement is representative of his avoidance of traditional forms.

The frequent use of open strings, thirds, perfect fourths and fifths, resembles the pitch content of *Perpetuum mobile*, which is most clearly seen in a direct quotation of *Perpetuum mobile* in the first measure of *The Carenza Jig*.

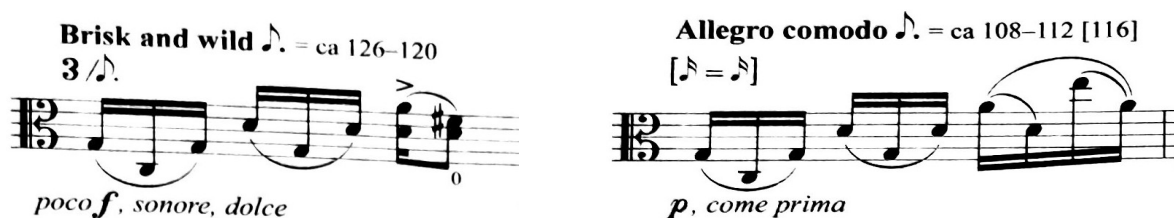


Figure 8: Kurtág, *The Carenza Jig* from *Signs, Games and Messages*, mm.1 and Kurtág, *Perpetuum mobile* from *Signs, Games and Messages*, mm.2, showing the quotation of the latter in the former, © Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by permission.⁶³

This consonant language is contrasted with harsh dissonances such as in m. 8 and m. 18.

Kurtág marks these measures “Like the screeching of a bird of prey,” highlighting the stark

⁶² Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 9

⁶³ Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages for Viola*, 8, 17.

contrast with the other material.⁶⁴



Figure 9: Kurtág, *The Carenza Jig* from *Signs, Games and Messages*, mm.5-14, showing the variety of materials and timbres within one phrase, © Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by permission.⁶⁵

As in early works like *Jelek II*, *The Carenza Jig* is dense with contrasts and variety, although contrasts in *The Carenza Jig* are less stark, creating a more transparently unified work. Subito dynamic changes, pizzicato, and consonant and dissonant harmonic languages are bound through consistent use of similar rhythms and repetition of material. Gestures and figures in *The Carenza Jig* function as cells that are repeated and varied throughout the piece. For example, several measures contain only three eighth notes on open strings. Although the dynamics, expression, and pitch change as this figure recurs throughout the piece, the overall gesture is clearly identifiable. A fragment of this figure also appears in measures five and fourteen. Connections and unity in *Jelek II* require closer analysis and scrutiny compared to the fragments of *The Carenza Jig*.

Despite the density of contrasting material, *The Carenza Jig* is straightforward relative to

⁶⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 17.

the other works of *Signs, Games and Messages*. Kurtág presents his version of a jig or a lively dance. *The Carezza Jig* is stylistically consistent with Kurtág's other works in its self-reference and brevity. Its playful nature refers to its dedicatee, and the symmetrical form and use of English markings refer to the place in which it was written.

CHAPTER THREE: *HOMMAGE À JOHN CAGE, IN MEMORIAM BLUM TAMÁS, AND KROÓ GYÖRGY IN MEMORIAM*

3.1 Background

Játékok was not only an outlet for Kurtág to embrace his ideas and explore the physical gestures of playing the piano, but also to write pieces honoring friends, colleagues, and composers. After beginning *Játékok* in 1973, he wrote many works with reference to individual people, such as *Grabstein für Stephan*, op. 15c, *Hommage a R. Sch.* Op., 15d, and *Officium Breve in Memoriam Andreae Szervánsky*, op. 28.⁶⁶ At times, these homages clearly contain allusions to the work of their honorees, such as *Hommage à Tchaikovsky* from *Játékok*, which opens with four measures closely resembling the exposition of Tchaikovsky's famous Piano Concerto No. 1. In Tchaikovsky's concerto, the orchestra plays the first theme while the piano plays ascending fortissimo chords in three octaves. Kurtág's piece uses clusters of pitches in three ascending octaves to be played with the palm of the hand, mirroring both the musical and physical gestures of Tchaikovsky's concerto despite the indeterminate pitch content.⁶⁷ *Hommage à Tchaikovsky* clearly functions as both an homage and a game for children learning the piano. One can imagine a child mimicking the famous opening of the concerto in much the same way without any instruction.

⁶⁶ Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, 290.

⁶⁷ Kurtág, *Játékok*, 21.

Hommage à Csajkovszkij

Hommage à Tschaikowski Hommage à Tchaikovsky

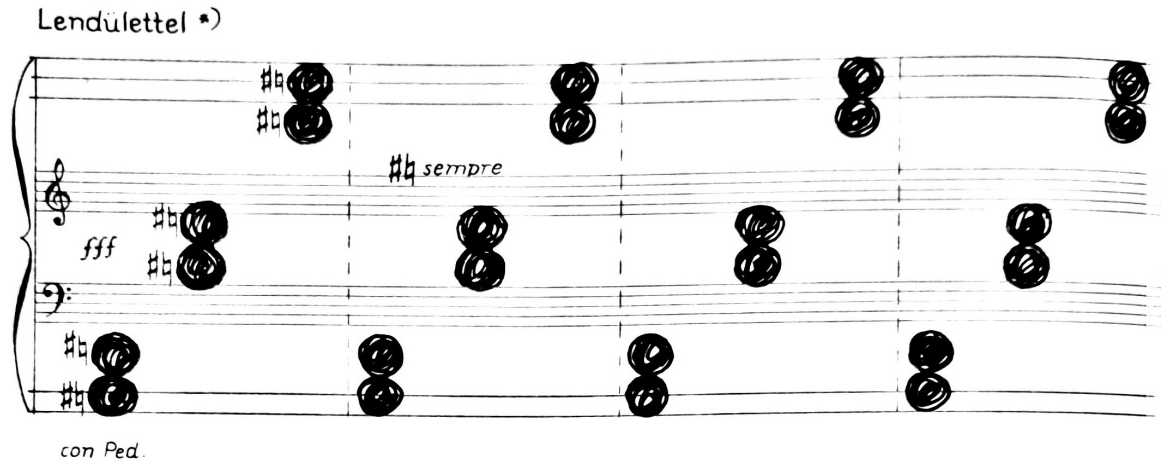


Figure 10: Kurtág, *Hommage à Tchaikovsky* from *Játékok* Volume 1, mm. 1-4, showing the mirroring of Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto no. 1, © Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by permission.⁶⁸

The intertextuality already present in Kurtág's other works is brought to the fore in these memorial pieces. *Officium Breve in Memoriam Andreae Szervánsky* makes explicit reference to the music of Andreae Szervánsky, which is also alluded to throughout the piece and quoted directly in the final movement.⁶⁹ Although Webern is not explicitly mentioned in the title of the work, his music is also referenced extensively in *Officium breve* and explicitly mentioned in the score, in addition to four memorials to others.⁷⁰ Kurtág also includes hidden references, including to his own music. Movement VIII is marked *in memoriam* to Gabriella Garzó and is taken from *Játékok* volume five's *Virág – Garzó Gabinak*. *Játékok* contains numerous pieces with “virág” in the title, referring to the line “virág az ember” (flowers we are) from *The Sayings of Peter Bornemizsa*.⁷¹ Still deeper layers of reference are present in *Officium breve*. This complex

⁶⁸ Kurtág, *Játékok*, 21.

⁶⁹ Willson, *Kurtág's Instrumental Music*, 19.

⁷⁰ Williams, *Kurtág, Modernity, Modernisms*, 62.

⁷¹ Williams, *Kurtág Modernity, Modernisms*, 62-63.

web of reference is not necessarily meant to be fully understood by listeners, scholars, and performers.⁷²

Many of Kurtág's memorial pieces were written immediately following the deaths of their respective honorees, such as ... *eine Blume für Tabea* ... from *Signs, Games, and Messages* for viola, which was written on the same day as the death of violist Tabea Zimmermann's husband David Shallon.⁷³ Simple and restrained musical material takes on a more profound significance with a stated dedication to a recently departed dear friend or colleague. As with some of Kurtág's simplest *objets trouvés*, the burden on the performer to make profound meaning from the music is heightened.

3.2 *Hommage à John Cage*:

Hommage à John Cage was written in 1987 and revised in 1991. Kurtág wrote identical versions for violin, viola, and cello. American composer John Cage was one of the most influential avant-garde composers of the twentieth century. Cage made use of indeterminacy, silence, and nontraditional sounds in his music, which contributed to his fame.⁷⁴ Kurtág had two influential encounters with Cage prior to composing *Hommage à John Cage*. In 1986, Cage visited Hungary to present at the Bartók Seminar.⁷⁵ Kurtág attended Cage's lecture and was struck by his voice and manner of speaking: "... the weird exclamations in his hoarse voice, the long pauses, provided a key to the music of the composer who struck Kurtág as a kind of

⁷² Ibid., 67.

⁷³ Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 54.

⁷⁴ Pritchett, James, Laura Kuhn, and Charles Hiroshi Garrett. "Cage, John." *Grove Music Online*. 10 Jul. 2012; Accessed 4 Jan. 2020. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002223954>.

⁷⁵ Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music*, 198.

prophet.”⁷⁶ The two met again in 1987 in Zurich: “He was standing in the lobby of the Opera House. I went up to him and told him my name: Kurtág. Whereupon Cage: guten Tag! Me: I'm Kurtág. He: guten Tag! (as a stage instruction: Kurtág giving up): Bye-bye! It was something like a composition; I jotted it down on a piece of paper.”⁷⁷

These two brief encounters between Kurtág and Cage illuminate the enigmatic *Hommage à John Cage*. In both instances, Kurtág notes the sound and musicality of Cage's speech. Accordingly, *Hommage à John Cage* is subtitled “Faltering words,” which appears to refer to Cage's “weird exclamations” and “long pauses” at the Bartók Seminar. The piece consists of groups of eighth notes of varying lengths separated by pauses indicated as commas in the sheet music, as well as longer notes at the ends of most phrases. The pauses are to be irregular in length, representing the pauses in Cage's lecture and the subtitle “Faltering words”.⁷⁸ As in *Jelek II*, Kurtág uses slurs and dotted lines to group notes together. The first line, for example, is connected under a large dotted line (figure). Within this group, there are two smaller groups marked by dotted lines and separated by a dotted barline. The first group contains three individual gestures separated by pauses, each containing only one or two notes. By contrast, the second group contains a half note followed by a pair of slurred eighth notes with no pause indicated. These groups can be organized into a hierarchy resembling speech: the largest group may be a sentence, followed by smaller clauses, followed by individual words separated by pauses. Each note within a slur can be thought of as one syllable.

⁷⁶ Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 118.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁷⁸ Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages*, 6.

per Viola

Molto moderato [♩ = 132–126]



Figure 11: Kurtág, *Hommage à John Cage* from *Signs, Games and Messages*, mm.1, showing the brief melodic fragments and irregular pauses, © Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by permission.⁷⁹

Where some of Kurtág's music is verbose with expression and dynamic markings, *Hommage à John Cage* is sparsely marked. By avoiding the variety and contrasts in dynamic and timbre that appear in some of his other works, Kurtág demands a heightened level of subtlety from the performer and grants significance to the small nuances of the melodic gestures. Ambiguous or open-ended notation signals an increased responsibility on the part of the performer to realize and interpret the music.⁸⁰ The contour of each melodic fragment informs the inflection and phrasing. Although Kurtág writes no meter, he leaves clues for the performer of the rhythmic structure through his use of note beaming and dotted barlines. These two features of the notation help to organize the music visually into traditional rhythmic groups and provide a framework through which the performer may interpret the rhythm. With these few clues, performers are able to create varied speech-like gestures from the melodic fragments of the piece. The deliberately unspecific markings may also be a nod to Cage's indeterminate music, or to Cage's well-known avoidance of expression in music. Even with the specificity of Kurtág's beaming and barlines, the variable lengths of the pauses creates distinct and different

⁷⁹ Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages for Viola*, 6.

⁸⁰ Mark Hutchinson, *Coherence in New Music: Experience, Aesthetics, Analysis*, (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2016): 181.

performances. This ambiguity and contradiction between control and freedom is common in Kurtág's work.⁸¹

The narrow range of pitches in each melodic gesture in the piece reflects the natural inflections of a speaking voice and draws attention again to the contour. For example, the first measure spans only a perfect fourth from A to D in the middle register of the viola. As opposed to the huge leaps in *Jelek II* or some of Kurtág's other pieces, leaps within *Hommage à John Cage* cover small intervals. The largest leap of the piece is a minor sixth at the beginning of the fourth measure from C to G-sharp.

Certain groups of pitches seem to imply tonal centers. The opening measure implies C major with its first five notes: C, A, D, B, D. This is undercut by the final three notes: A-sharp, C-sharp, A. This measure can also be read as implying A major/minor. The lower notes of each gesture form a line of their own: C, A, B, A-sharp, A. As scale degrees in A minor, these notes would be 3, 1, 2, flat 2 (sharp 1), 1. A similar process unfolds in the second measure. The first six notes could fit into B major: B, C-sharp, A-sharp, C-sharp, G-sharp, C-sharp. If the next note were A-sharp again before the final B, this reading would be compelling. Instead, Kurtág writes A natural, distorting the pull towards B. One may also read the first two measures as slowly descending from the opening C to the B at the end of the second measure. This ambiguity in the pitch content serves to lessen the sense of a traditional organization of pitches into a key or a collection. Instead, the focus is placed on the contour of the melodic fragments and the irregular pauses between them.

By restricting the variety of many music elements, Kurtág creates a striking piece in *Hommage à John Cage*. He reflects the mysterious quality of Cage and his music in the sparse

⁸¹ Hutchinson, *Coherence in New Music*, 180.

simplicity of the piece, while depicting the fragmented speech of the composer that fascinated him in his two encounters with Cage.

3.3 *In memoriam Blum Tamás:*

In memoriam Blum Tamás was written in January 1992 shortly after Tamás Blum's death. Blum was a Hungarian conductor and close friend of Kurtág, who conducted the premiere of Kurtág's Viola Concerto with the Railway Symphony Orchestra of Debrecen in 1955.⁸² As the head of the Opera House of Debrecen, he also allowed Kurtág to coach the singers, which was highly influential on the composer.⁸³ Although Kurtág's experience in rehearsing the Viola Concerto was difficult and unpleasant, which some attribute to his avoidance of large ensemble writing for the majority of his career, his friendship with Blum flourished.⁸⁴

Kurtág includes the name of a violist, former student, and frequent collaborator of his, Judit Horvath, at the end of the piece alongside the location and date of completion.⁸⁵ Horvath is also mentioned in connection with other pieces of *Signs, Games, and Messages*. *H. J.-nóta* or “Horvath Judit song” is a piece with folk influence dedicated to Horvath and written in April 1987.⁸⁶ *H. J.-nóta* is an elaboration of another piece *Népdalféle*, which was written at the same time as *H. J.-nóta*.⁸⁷ *To the exhibition of Sári Gerlőczy* also includes the initials H. J. with the date of completion.⁸⁸ In an interview in 1996, Kurtág mentioned that Horvath “went and played the piece for Józsa Blum,” Tamás Blum's widow.⁸⁹ Although it is unclear if the piece in question is *In*

⁸² Varga, *Three Interviews*, 127.

⁸³ Ibid., 118.

⁸⁴ Willson, *Kurtág's Instrumental Music*, 15.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 15, 120.

⁸⁶ Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages*, 16.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁹ Varga, *Three Interviews*, 34, 120.

memoriam Blum Tamás, the exchange draws a connection between Horvath and Blum. Kurtág also mentions revising and rewriting solo viola pieces after hearing them performed by Horvath, hinting at the possibility that Horvath aided Kurtág in the composition or revision of *In memoriam Blum Tamás* through performance.⁹⁰

In memoriam Blum Tamás is in two sections: the first is marked “Calmo, sereno,” and the second “Arioso, molto sostenuto.” Unlike many of Kurtág's solo works, the first section clearly fits into a 2/4 meter with mostly two bar phrases beginning on the second beat of the measure and marked with dotted lines. This creates a regular and simple affect in the section, which works in tandem with the “pulsato” or “pulsing” indication in the score to evoke a slow and steady heartbeat. Within this steady rhythmic framework, Kurtág explores a variety of emotions through dynamics, consonance, dissonance, and timbre that at times contradict the “calm” indication at the outset of the section.

The opening phrase is marked piano with no other dynamic indications and is mostly consonant, beginning with a unison A and ending with a perfect fifth. The melodic line moves in the lower voice against a pedal A in the upper voice creating harmonic consonances and dissonances, although the dissonant notes of the lower line resolve into a consonance and all the pitches belong to A major. The first G-sharp, which creates a minor second against the pedal a, functions as a passing tone to the consonant F-sharp, while the second G-sharp can be heard as resolving up to the open A on the following note. The interplay of consonance and dissonance continues in the second phrase with diminishing mitigation of dissonance. Dissonant pitches no longer fit into A major or any diatonic key. This increase in dissonance continues in the third phrase, where the consistent A stops and the pitch range expands drastically. Although

⁹⁰ Ibid., 30.

the expression of these first three phrases intensifies, the dynamic does not increase from *piano*. The calmness of the section is interrupted by four *forte* D's in unison in measures six and seven, foreshadowing the turbulence to come later in the section. Given the title of the piece, the opening section can be interpreted as an expression of grief with varying degrees of pain represented.

Following this interruption, Kurtág repeats the process of the first passage with some variations. The second beat of measure seven returns to *piano* and the shifting consonances and dissonances of the opening for four measures before suddenly dropping to *pianississimo molto sul tasto*. From this extremely soft and delicate sound, the piece crescendos to a *fortissimo* climax. The contrast between the extremes of the dynamic range of the viola are emphasized by the shift from single notes in the low register in the softest dynamic to the extreme dissonance of minor seconds and quarter-tones in the high register at the peak of the crescendo. Kurtág also indicates that the sound quality should become uglier, even to the point of scratching.⁹¹

The first section of *In memoriam Blum Tamás* can be seen as two phrases: measures 1-7, and measures 7-18. Both phrases follow a similar trajectory, with the first foreshadowing the intensity of the second. Symbolically, this section can be interpreted as an experience of grief ranging from quiet unrest to desperate cries. Despite Kurtág's verbose markings at the beginning of the section, the calmness and simplicity eventually give way to emotionally charged, harsh dissonance.

In a reference to Blum's career in opera conducting, Kurtág marks the second section "Arioso, molto sostenuto". Once again the marking at the outset of the section is contradicted

⁹¹ Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages*, 20.

by the music: instead of a long lyrical line, the section consists of two brief phrases consisting of long notes and punctuated by quarter notes. The use of open strings and perfect fourths and fifths also subverts the typical stepwise motion of an Arioso, resembling instead an *objet trouvé*. Whereas the first section of *In memoriam Blum Tamás* has a clear dramatic arc from calm to intense that is emphasized through many musical elements, the second section is bare and austere in its musical material, leaving performers and audiences to speculate on the meaning. As in Kurtág's other works, the ambiguity in notation increases the responsibility of the performer to seek a compelling interpretation of the music.⁹²

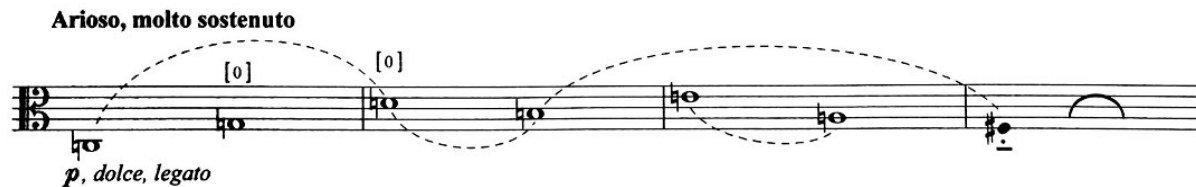


Figure 12: Kurtág, *In memoriam Blum Tamás* from *Signs, Games and Messages*, mm.19-22, showing the *objet trouvé* material of the Arioso, © Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by permission.⁹³

Over the fermata following the final note of the piece, Kurtág writes “... már Blum Tamás is odaát vár ...” which translates to “Tamás Blum is already there waiting.” This brief message is visible only to the performer, prompting the question of how to convey this message to the audience, or indeed whether to convey this message at all. As in *Waltz in C* from *Játékok*, Kurtág's direction goes beyond traditional use of instrument, or even the creation of sound. If this message is meant to be conveyed to the audience, it must be done through mere silent stage presence. The nominal closure provided by this line is mirrored in the Arioso section as a whole. After the harsh dissonance at the end of the first section, the simplicity and bareness of

⁹² Hutchinson, *Coherence in New Music*, 181.

⁹³ Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages for Viola*, 20.

the Arioso reflects an acceptance of sorts. Despite the ambiguity present in the piece, the musical materials resonate with experiences of loss or grief, which vary from agony to numbness.

3.4 *Kroó György in memoriam*:

Kroó György in memoriam was written in 1997 after the death of Hungarian musicologist and music critic György Kroó. Kroó studied violin and musicology at the Liszt Academy, where he later taught and served as the head of the musicology faculty from 1973 until 1996. Kroó played a significant role in Hungarian musical culture in the twentieth century, and wrote extensively on the music of Bartók, Wagner, and Liszt.⁹⁴ Though his research focused on music of the past, Kroó also engaged with new music as a critic, writing about Kurtág's music as early as *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza*, op. 7. His comparison of *Játékok* to Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* helped to elevate both the work and the composer.⁹⁵ Through consistent discussion and praise of Kurtág's work, Kroó played an important role in advancing Kurtág's career, even before his broader European recognition in 1981.

Kroó György in memoriam is the most introverted and restrained of the pieces of *Signs, Games, and Messages*. Kurtág instructs the performer to use a metal mute, which significantly dampens the sound of the instrument, and to play "Almost without contact and barely audible."⁹⁶ In *Kroó György in memoriam*, the extremely delicate and soft dynamic is matched by extremely limited musical material. The entire piece is an *objet trouvé*, consisting of descending

94 Domokos, Zsuzsanna. "Kroó, György." *Grove Music Online*. 2001; Accessed 4 Jan. 2020. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000015573>.

95 Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music*, 100, 149.

96 Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages*, 31.

stepwise lines in whole notes at a slow *Larghissimo* tempo with almost no expressive or dynamic indications, which are often used as the foundation of a poignant memorial. *Kroó György in memoriam* also reworks material from the first movement of Kurtág's ... *quasi una fantasia* ..., op. 27, no 1, which consists of descending whole note lines in the piano accompanied by delicate percussion.⁹⁷ In contrast to the broad spatial element of ... *quasi una fantasia* ..., in which instruments are placed in different locations in the performance space, *Kroó György in memoriam* creates a minimized sense of space.⁹⁸

Only two phrases ascend, providing a subtle contrast in character to the main material. Both ascending phrases in *Kroó György in memoriam* begin with open strings, still in whole notes. The expression and gesture of these passages is similar to the *Arioso* section of *In memoriam Blum Tamás*. In both pieces open strings and perfect fifths evoke an almost otherworldly purity, while simultaneously functioning as an *objets trouvés*.⁹⁹ Although the performer is less able to control the sound of the open strings, Kurtág chooses this place in *Kroó György in memoriam* to mark *dolce*, *misterioso*, reflecting the composer's ability to elevate simple materials to profound emotional significance. The *pochissimo* hairpin from E to F from measure 19 to 20, however minimized, is the first dynamic indication in the piece.

⁹⁷ Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music*, 222.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 221.

⁹⁹ Catherine Laws, "Beckett and Kurtág," *Samuel Beckett Today* 15 (2005), 247.

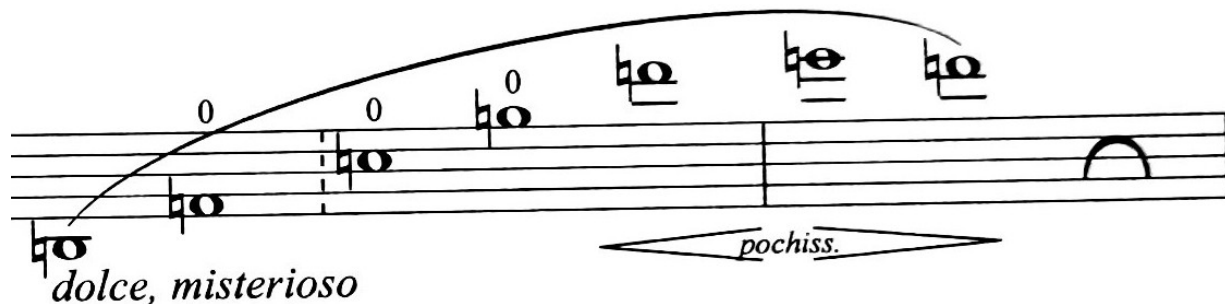


Figure 13: Kurtág, *Kroó György in memoriam* from *Signs, Games and Messages*, mm.18-20, showing the first ascending gesture, © Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by permission.¹⁰⁰

The piece develops subtly from phrase to phrase by increasing the length of the descending scales and altering the pitch content of the scales. The first half of the piece (measures 1-18) begins with a seven note descending scale: A, G, F, E, D, C, B-flat. Each subsequent phrase expands this scale until the full twelve note descending scale appears in measures 14-18: E-flat, D-flat, C-flat, A, G, F, E, D, C, B-flat, A-flat, G-flat. At this moment, the pitch material can be identified as Whole Tone 1 followed by Whole Tone 0, shifting from the former to the later directly in the center of the scale. By placing this shift in the middle of the scales, Kurtág obscures the whole tone scales in the earlier phrases. For example, the first phrase contains only the seven diatonic pitches of F major, though the starting and ending pitches subvert this hearing as well. This ambiguity combined with the inherent ambiguity of the symmetrical whole tone scales works in tandem with the soft sound and slow tempo to create an almost timeless experience in the first section of the piece. The contrasting material of measures 18-20 act as a conclusion to this section.

Instead of clear whole tone collections, the second section of the piece uses ambiguous

¹⁰⁰ Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages for Viola*, 31.

scales that appear to be built of fragments. Measures 21 through 24 consist of four three-note groups of descending whole steps separated by half steps between groups, which is altered on the downbeat of measure 25. Had the pattern continued, the downbeat of measure 25 would have been G instead of the written F-sharp. The second phrase is far more ambiguous, with its use of augmented seconds, major seconds, and minor seconds. Following the second phrase, Kurtág marks the end of the section with the second ascending passage marked *dolce, come prima* followed by a short coda.

Another trajectory can be observed in the piece. Each descending scale increases in intensity through several musical elements over the course of both sections of the piece. The length of each scale increases from seven notes in the first scale to 21 in the final scale, while also beginning at a higher pitch level and ending at a lower pitch level. This is reinforced by the development of the pitch content from the potentially diatonic opening to whole tone scales, to the chromatic final scale. Finally, Kurtág uses expression indications in the final two scales to increase the intensity with the markings *molto docile* and *espressivo, intenso* respectively. Due to the metal mute, the eventual climax is barely louder than the opening of the piece.

The piece begins with the shortest and most consonant scale, which is followed by a repetition of its final three notes marked *esitando* or “hesitate.” The scale begins again returning to “quasi a tempo,” but it ends one note early. A similar process takes place following the second scale. It is presented in full and repeated partially with the marking *esitando*. These halting fragments interrupt the steady increase in intensity. Another *esitando* phrase appears at the end of the piece and descrescendos into the final restatement of the first scale marked “senza tempo” and *quasi non sentito* or “almost not heard,” daring the performer to play still

softer.

The softness and delicacy of the piece requires a heightened level of focus from the performer. As a result, the experience of playing the piece is meditative. Despite the apparent simplicity of the piece, *Kroó György in memoriam* is one of the most challenging pieces in *Signs, Games and Messages* for performers. Any lapse in focus or commitment threatens to trivialize the piece or bore the audience. As in *In memoriam Blum Tamás*, Kurtág gives performers and the audience space to fill with their own interpretations and meanings. Audiences indeed may also feel pressured by the extreme softness of the piece. Any movement or sound in the performance space runs the risk of detracting from the suspended temporality of the piece.

CHAPTER FOUR: SAMUEL BECKETT: LE NAIN

4.1 Samuel Beckett: le nain:

Kurtág has shown a strong interest in vocal music and music with text throughout his career, beginning with *The Sayings of Peter Bornemizsa*, op. 7, which foreshadowed a long period of writing primarily vocal compositions from approximately 1973 to 1987.¹⁰¹ The only piece in the viola version of *Signs, Games, and Messages* with an explicitly referenced text is *Samuel Beckett: le nain*, which was written in 1994. Kurtág's interest in Beckett's work in particular has spanned decades of his career, from his two settings of *What is the Word* in 1990 and 1991, to his lone opera *Fin de partie* based on Beckett's *Endgame* written in 2018.^{102 103} Shared stylistic traits between Beckett and Kurtág may have contributed to Kurtág's decision to set his text. Beckett's work is often fragmented, brief, and enigmatic. It also often deals with ontological questions of creating art and contradiction.¹⁰⁴ These similarities can be seen in Kurtág's two settings of *What is the Word*, in which Beckett's poem depicts "the real stuttering of the actress Ildikó Monyók caused by a near-fatal car accident, which prevented her from speaking."¹⁰⁵ The realism of Beckett's stuttering poem is realized as yelling and whimpering in Kurtág's settings. *What is the Word* also reflects difficult in creating art on the part of both Beckett and Kurtág.¹⁰⁶

Samuel Beckett: le nain uses the text of one of the Irish author's *Mirlitonnades* with the

101 Willson, "Kurtág's Instrumental Music," 15.

102 Laws, "Beckett and Kurtág," 242.

103 Alex Ross, "György Kurtág, With his Opera of 'Endgame,' Proves to be Beckett's Equal," accessed January 28, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/24/György-Kurtág-with-his-opera-of-endgame-proves-to-be-becketts-equal>.

104 Laws, "Beckett and Kurtág," 242.

105 Williams, *Music Theatre and Presence*, 367.

106 Laws, "Beckett and Kurtág," 242.

same title “Le nain.”¹⁰⁷ Beckett's *Mirlitonades* are a collection of “scraps of verse” written between 1976 and 1980. The term comes from the French “mirliton,” which is a toy flute, evoking a similar almost throwaway nature to the poems as Kurtág's *objets trouvés*.¹⁰⁸ “Le nain” is a single four-line stanza in French, well suited to a Kurtágian fragment. The brief text depicts a wistful moment at the end of life. An approximate translation into English reads as follows: “the dwarf in his last / nonagenarian gasp / for mercy's sake at least / a full-sized coffin.” Kurtág replaces the word “dernier” with “ultime” in his setting, changing the “last” gasp to an “ultimate” gasp. An earlier draft from Beckett also uses “ultime” in place of “dernier.”¹⁰⁹ The simple observations of the first two lines change to an emotionally charged plea in the third line “for mercy's sake.” In the final line, the full-sized coffin represents an ordinary or commonplace thing that nevertheless eludes the subject of the poem. Like Kurtág's music, Beckett finds room for depth of meaning and ambiguity in interpretation even in a short poem.

Kurtág evokes the nonagenarian dwarf's voice with an extreme and unusual viola timbre achieved through scordatura and the use of a metal mute. Performers may choose between two scordatura options: F, D, C, F; or F, D, E-flat, F. In both cases, the tuning is far removed from the standard tuning, resulting in very low string tension.

107 Samuel Beckett, *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Seán Lawlor and John Pilling (New York: Grove Press, 2012), 447.

108 Beckett, *The Collected Poems*, 447.

109 Ibid., 464.

Lentement, très fatigué
*voce bianca,
 senza colore
 legatissimo*

le nain non - a - ge -
 con sordino di metallo

Scordatura I

Scordatura II

III II
 con sordino di metallo

III II

Figure 14: Kurtág, *Samuel Beckett: le nain* from *Signs, Games and Messages*, mm.1, showing the scordatura indications, © Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by permission.¹¹⁰

Rather than the typical resonant, somewhat nasal viola timbre, Kurtág achieves a hoarse sound of a deep voice in an undersized body; the pitch range of the piece is more suited to the larger body of the cello. By adding a metal mute, Kurtág further dampens the sound of the viola and evokes the fatigue of old age. His tempo marking “Lentement, très fatigué” corroborates this reading. The structure of the music follows the poem, which is notated in a cue part for voice showing the syllabic setting of the text. Kurtág writes short phrases separated by silences, largely following the lines of the poem. Only the third line is interrupted mid-phrase by silence between “de grâce” and “au moins.”

¹¹⁰ Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages for Viola*, 22.

Kurtág's decision to include a setting of the text in a cue part along with the viola music introduces uncertainty in terms of performance. The possibility of performing the work with a singer is opened by this notation. Although it is unclear whether this work is meant to be performed with or without voice, some musical elements may inform the performer's decision. Both lines are written in exact unison throughout the piece. It is plausible that the vocal cue line is present to show the performer the exact "setting" of the text. This use of unison writing combined with the metal mute create an issue of balance between the voice and the viola. Extreme dynamic control in all parts of the vocal range would be required to create an even balance. Ultimately, the lack of specificity in the notation validates either interpretation in performance. One possible reading is that the muted sound of the viola embodies the literal "last gasp" of the subject of Beckett's poem.

As in *Kroó György in memoriam*, Kurtág avoids dynamic and expression markings for most of the piece. The opening is marked *senza colore*, which is maintained until the third line in measures 6 to 8, at which point Kurtág adds small hairpin crescendos and decrescendos following the contour of the melodic line. In the vocal cue, he marks *quasi cantabile, espressivo*. This subtle expressiveness lines up with the plea expressed in the text of this line. By using a pale and expressionless sound elsewhere in the piece, Kurtág evokes a final musical plea against a tired, muffled, and hoarse musical backdrop.

Z. 14 221

Berlin, 1994. I. 1-2

Figure 15: Kurtág, *Samuel Beckett: le nain* from *Signs, Games and Messages*, mm.7-9, showing the only instances of expression markings, © Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by permission.¹¹¹

By using only one sounding pitch at a time, Kurtág emphasizes the vocal character of the music, although the large leaps would make singing difficult. The position and string on which each note is to be played is marked clearly due to the unusual tuning. As a byproduct or an intentional result, Kurtág specifies the string crossings of the piece, mirroring the time required for the human voice to cover large intervallic leaps as in measure 6.

Samuel Beckett: le nain is also an homage to Swiss composer Roland Moser, born in 1943 in Bern. Moser's career has included teaching theory and composition at the university level, as

¹¹¹ Kurtág, *Signs, Games and Messages* for Viola, 22.

well as over 40 years of performing and composition experience with the Ensemble Neue Horizonte Bern. His interest in vocal music and language align with the element of text in Kurtág's piece.¹¹² Kurtág's use of text in music informs the structure of the music, as well as the depth of meaning in the music.¹¹³ In place of the mystique and ambiguity of his purely instrumental works, those with text create a clearer sense of expression and meaning.

112 Roland Moser, "Nur je Dem Das Seine," Program notes for *Reflexion*, J.S. Bach-Siftung, St. Gallen, November 16, 2012. Accessed December 31, 2019,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20150617173404/>

http://www.bachstiftung.ch/media/filer_public/2012/11/02/abendprogramm_bwv_163_einzelseiten.pdf

113 Willson, "Kurtág's Instrumental Music," 15.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Like much modernist art, György Kurtág's music is intentionally mysterious and difficult to understand. The brevity of most pieces barely allows listeners time to process what they are hearing. Within these tiny structures, Kurtág packs many layers of meaning and ambiguity. From his highly specific scores with verbose instructions to the blank slate of pieces such as *Kroo György in memoiam*, each note feels intentional and deliberate. This quality, however, is not readily self-evident. Performers and listeners must examine Kurtág's music and its context closely to unravel its significance and meaning. While this may be true of all music, it applies particularly to Kurtág. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on Kurtág's major contribution to the viola repertoire and to help enable future performers to perform these works by contextualizing them within the broader context of Kurtág's oeuvre. *Signs, Games and Messages* is not only a collection of compelling music, but also a representation of one of the most unique and important living composers.

Kurtág's music challenges many assumptions about modern music. Modernity in music is sometimes seen as a pursuit of absolute music, or music that stands totally by itself without any reference to other music, or to things outside of music. Kurtág instead writes music that is keenly aware of its place in an ever-growing and evolving web of musical and extramusical context.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Williams, "Kurtág, Modernity, Modernisms," 66.

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APPENDIX A: LETTER OF PERMISSION FROM PUBLISHER



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DMA Candidate
Louisiana State
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