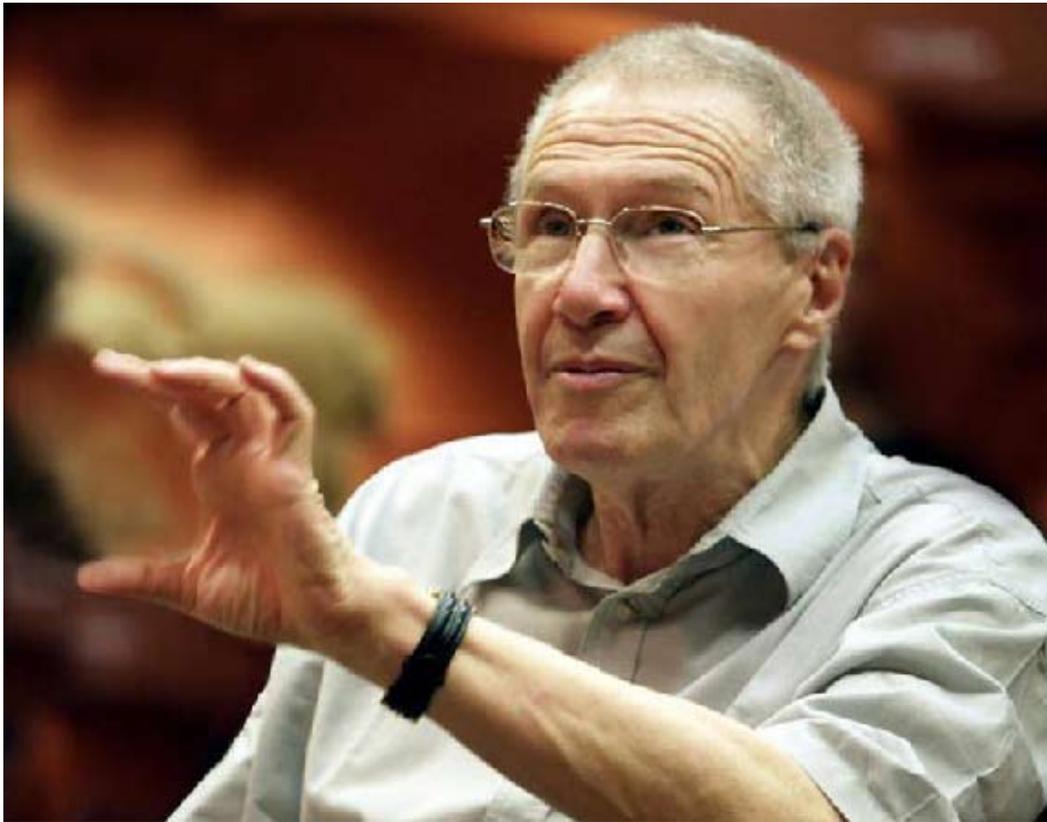


KARIN WAGNER, AUSTRIA

“Adoration, adoration, accursed desolation...”
György Kurtág’s affinity to

Hungarian Folklore



György Kurtág (Internet-photo)

György Kurtág’s (*1926) *Quartetto per archi* op. 1 was composed in 1959. This marked a restart and a “sharp bend” in the composer’s musical biography. The brutal ending of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 caused a deep crisis in Kurtág’s life, which also affected his year of study in Paris 1957/58 and finally led to a

tremendous change of style and aesthetic.¹ The compositional turning-point to the string quartet op. 1 was musically influenced by Darius Milhaud and Olivier Messiaen, and particularly by the music of Anton Webern. Of course, Béla Bartók was a magnificent idol, too.² With his *Quartetto per archi* op. 1 in six

movements Kurtág reflects the so called “bow form”, which Bartók established in his *Fourth* (1928) and *Fifth String Quartet* (1934). Instead of using five movements, as Bartók did,³ Kurtág groups the movements I (*Poco agitato*) and VI (*Adagio*) as well as II (*Con moto*) and V (*Molto ostinato*) around the central-field of III

(*Vivacissimo; Lento*) and IV (*Con spirito*).⁴ In the first movement of op. 1 Kurtág also uses Bartók's by the Hungarian theoretician Ernő Lendvai (1925–1993) so-termed "alpha-chords": two triads⁵ on F sharp and C (tritone-distance), respectively with major- and minor-triads. Symmetrical forms and inversions, both in the wider context as well as in punctual interval-constructions, play a prominent role in Kurtág's *Quartetto per archi* op. 1 and point out the association to Bartók's quartets, which ostentatiously reflect the idea of symmetry.⁶ Figurations like ostinato-sections, glissandi and canon-techniques also correspond with elements in Bartók's

music.⁷ In his engagement with Messiaen, Webern and Bartók, György Kurtág did not solely adapt and generalize or even marginalize single compositional elements, but in fact he changed the meaning of musical techniques and ideas of form. Interlacing chromatic and almost serial material with diatonic scales in op. 1, Kurtág creates a relation between his own national tradition and the then current Western Avant-garde. Focussing on piano-music of that time, Kurtág's *Eight Pieces* op. 3 (1960) show characteristics of the composer's subsequent style: besides ostinato-technique, hoquetus-technique, diatonic

and pentatonic scales as well as canon-techniques, Kurtág then developed a way to play the piano like imitating the sound of a cimbalom, a hammered dulcimer, popularized in Hungary, which then found its way to other areas of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Reflecting this instrument in his piano-pieces, Kurtág directly connects the piano with indigenous Hungarian Folklore.⁸ At the same time he composed *Eight Duos for Violin and Cimbalom* op. 4 (1960/61).⁹

! Video youtube: Jenő Farkas, *Cimbalom, Szalai Hungarian Gypsy Band*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mRO_nFTato



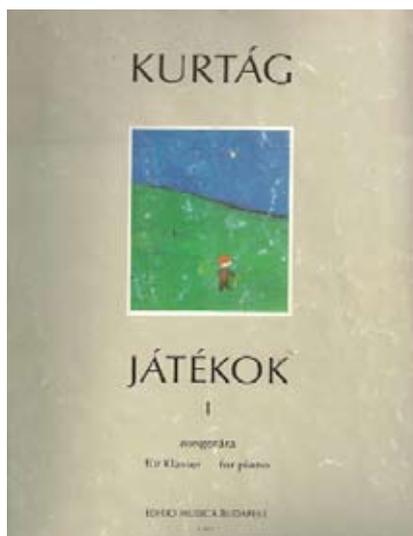
Mihály Halmágyi (Internet-photo)

There are some pieces in Kurtág's oeuvre based on that reference. Above all, especially in *Hommage à Halmágyi Mihály*, a four-handed piece in *Játékok IV*, Kurtág typified the style of playing the piano like a cimbalom in an astonishing way. The Secondo-part (Tempo II. *Pesante, con moto*) imitates the cimbalom powerful and intensively. The Primo-part

(Tempo I. *Molto rubato*) interacts with the cimbalom in different tempo and key. Nevertheless each part vivifies the other. One of the most fascinating moments is towards the end, when the cimbalom rises higher and higher to fade out and to vanish atmospheric above the grounding sonorous chords. The piece is dedicated to Mihály Halmágyi, a folklore-violin-

nist, whom Kurtág met in Transylvania.

! Audio: *Hommage à Halmágyi Mihály (Játékok IV)*, György and Márta Kurtág CD: *Játékok (Games) and Bach Transcriptions*, ECM 1619, 453 511-2 Track 13



Játékok I (Editio Musica Budapest Z. 8377)



Játékok VIII (Editio Musica Budapest Z. 14591)

In 1973 the Hungarian piano-pedagogue Mariann Teöke asked Kurtág to compose pieces for children, that were meant to be published in the 1977-anthology *Tarka-Barka* (*Potpourri*).¹⁰ Kurtág then wrote *Elő-Játékok* (*Pre-Games*) and entered the sphere of *Játékok* (*Games*) (8 volumes are published until now). Primarily intended as children's pieces, *Játékok* stimulate improvisation and creative activity, they evoke the interpreter's identification with the musical material and enable a high level of self-awareness in staging different musical characters.¹¹ Haptic and gestural piano-playing is characteristic for those pieces. Snap-shots, a "musical diary", a workshop for his life, a kind of "notebook": that's what Kurtág called the arising pieces.

In *Játékok* Kurtág steps into dialogue with the past. Someti-

mes the pieces are addressed to persons (*Hommage à ...*, *In memoriam ...*) or they reflect elapsed musical elements such as Hoquetus or Alberti-basses. Especially in operating with different aesthetics, those "transcendent voices" of the past seem to be hidden and can only be recognized by experts. Compositional reception refers to historical determined, pre-existing material. The way of reception in *Játékok* is complex and shows three possibilities:

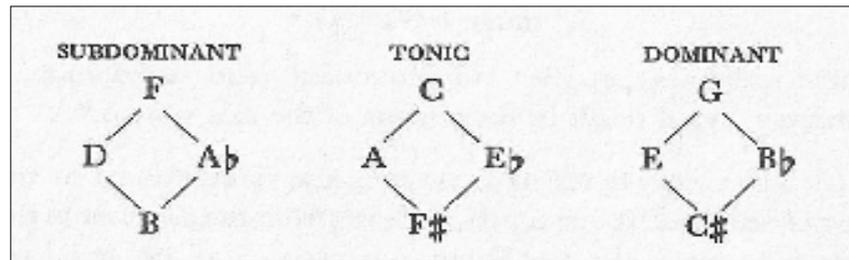
1. Reception of *Játékok*-pieces within the 8 volumes of *Játékok*,
2. Reception of other composer's

works, 3. Reception of Kurtág's own works.¹²

Citation can be seen as the paradigm of "imitative compositional reception".¹³ The new composition roots directly in a concrete verifiable pretext. But more than strict citation, Kurtág loves the concept of allusion, the paradigm of "transformative compositional reception".¹⁴ The material is not directly quoted, but the habit of the original is evident through a coded new text, through constructive transfer of former impulses. Allusions enable a special relation to tradition. Continuity in tradition is significant for Kurtág's piano works, first and foremost for *Játékok*. Nevertheless Kurtág rarely uses direct citation; if this is the case, then more in a way of self-reflecting "updated interpretation" of his own compositions.¹⁵



Ernő Lendvai (1925–1993) (Internet-photo)



"The Axis System" (Lendvai, Ernő: *Béla Bartók. An Analysis of his Music. With an introduction by Alan Bush. London 1990, S. 9*)

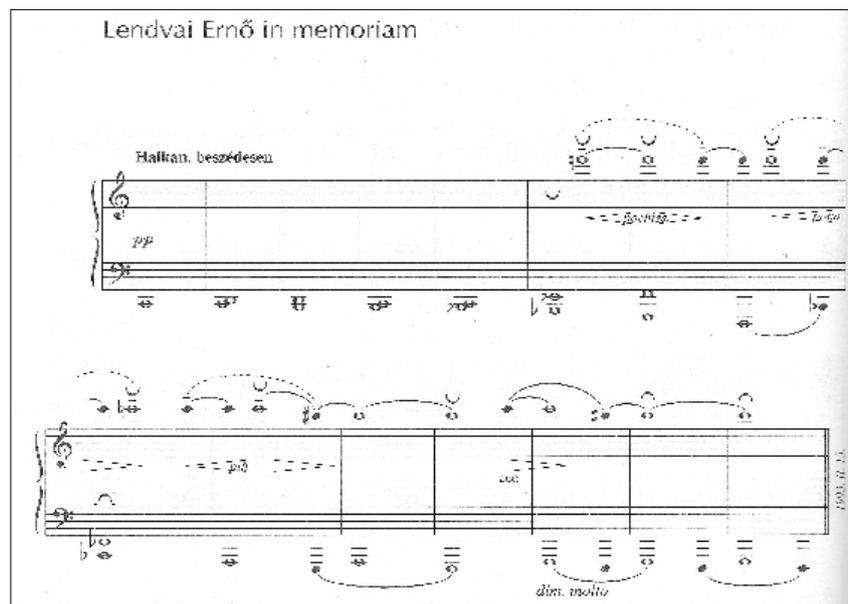
In Kurtág's "dialogue with the past", Béla Bartók is of greatest significance. Not only did Kurtág learn Bartók's music through analysis but also through the theories of Ernő Lendvai, whom Kurtág knew from a seminar with Bence Szabolczi at the Academy in Budapest.¹⁶ A great number of Lendvai's analyses were addressed to Bartók's music.¹⁷ Lendvai can be seen as a kind of "moder-

rator" in the dialogue between Kurtág and Bartók. In explaining the system of Bartók's tonality, Lendvai exposed the "axis system", where the opposed poles (C and F sharp) are more connected than the common relatives of the classical theory.¹⁸

"The axis system implies the recognition of the fact that the common relative for A and E flat is not only C, but

also F sharp (=G flat); that D and A flat not only have F as a common relative, but also B; and that E and B flat not only have G, but also C sharp (=D flat) as common relatives."¹⁹

Lendvai's role as a "moderator" between Kurtág and Bartók is evident in *Játékok*-pieces which focus on the "axis-system". There, Lendvai's concept to represent Bartók's tonality, is exemplified.



Lendvai Ernő in memoriam (*Játékok VI*) (Editio Musica Budapest Z. 14068)

With *Lendvai Ernő in memoriam* (*Játékok VI*) or *One More Word to Ernő Lendvai* (*Játékok I*) Kurtág therefore also pays tribute to Bartók, even though not directly.²⁰ The central idea of the piece *Lendvai Ernő in memoriam* is a double movement in minor triads in each hand (C–E flat–A flat; E–G–C sharp), shifted to each other by a semitone (C, C sharp).

Each phase belongs to another axis of Lendvai's system: from C (Tonic) the symmetrical movement starts to F, F–D represent the Subdominant, E–C sharp represent the Dominant.²¹

In other pieces Kurtág establishes interval-constructions based on the Golden Section or the Fibonacci Series, also echoing the

significant and prior mentioned "alpha-chord", which Lendvai sees as a direct expression of the Golden Section or Fibonacci Series.²² Kurtág reflects both, Lendvai's theoretical concept and Bartók's musical language. This implicates engagement in Hungarian tradition.

Hommage à Bartók

*nyergényellől, 1. VI. 3. oldal
 *mit az ujjhegyével, siehe S. VI 8
 *with the edge of the palm, see p. VI, 8

Hommage a Bartók (Játékok I) (Editio Musica Budapest Z. 8377)

Frequently quoted statements as “My mothertongue is Bartók”²³ apostrophize Kurtág’s connection to Bartók and whistle-blow, what the analytical view confirms: as touched before, in Kurtág’s *Quartetto per archi* op. 1 Bartók is omnipresent. Bartók’s string quartets establish symmetries in different implementations, “like a flower bud, whose leaves coat the flower’s nucleus”,²⁴ as Hans Oesch noted. And not only in the formal complex of Kurtág’s quartet, but

also in interval-constructions, in axially-symmetric lines or in symmetric encircling of single tones, one can specify the motto of “symmetry”. It might therefore be astonishing that within the whole compendium of *Játékok* Kurtág just only one time places a piece in pronounced honour to his idol.

But exactly the small 9-bar *Hommage a Bartók (Játékok I)* concentrates many phenomena that link both Hungarian composers.

Unspectacular and therefore all the more important: in accomplished interval-symmetry around the imaginative centre C, this rhythmically and metrically Folklore-oriented miniature, opening and closing symmetrically, is the perfect reference to Bartók.²⁶ Also to be seen as a “resume” of what is exposed in Kurtág’s quartet op. 1, where Bartók’s “bow-form”, types of symmetries and rhythmical models of the Hungarian Folklore are evident.

Sirató (1)
Klagegesang (1) Dirge (1)

Sirató 1 (Játékok III) (Editio Musica Budapest Z. 8379)

With the archetype of “Sirató” and the topos of “Lamento” Kurtág reflects Hungarian tradition in a very specific manner. “Sirató” roots in Hungarian Folklore: monotonously, the mourning people improvise in ritual songs, based on a schema of short sections with a melody declining

in the compass of a fourth. The central idea of those dirges and their more or less transformed characteristics shape Kurtág’s instrumental-music and developed to idiomatic constants and a “model of texture”.²⁷ In 1974 Kurtág wrote two pieces for *Játékok III*, entitled *Sirató 1* and

Sirató 2. With its rhythmically parallel guided intervals in slow movement, *Sirató 1* does not represent the typical Lamento-idiom, it differs from the Sirató-texture; although chromatic progressions and double stops are evident in both Sirató-pieces.²⁸



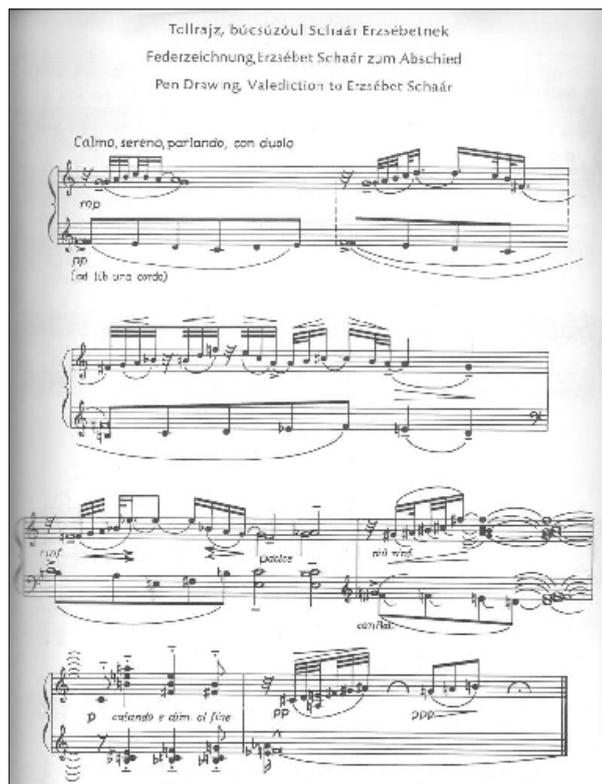
Sirató 2 (Játékok III) (Editio Musica Budapest Z. 8379)

In *Sirató 2* Kurtág finally establishes his basic type of Sirató-model in memorable structure with the potential to incite to more compositions of that idiom. With rising and descending minor seconds in horizontal lines and improvising moments of exclamation against a mainly chromatic bass-line, with recitative-like passages in *accelerando* and *ritardando*, and with caesuras, which may correlate with verse-lines of a folksong, this miniature represents Hungarian Folklore. A piece of high intensity in *mezzopiano*

sonore, with a choked crescendo, reflecting pain. The first two bars of *Sirató 2* define the whole piece, and it is of greatest interest, that the chromatic melody in semiquavers derives directly from the II and III movement of the *Quartetto per archi* op. 1. The idiom of the piece can be seen as a continuation of “Sprechgesang” in Hungarian Folksongs.²⁹

! **Audio:** *Sirató 2 (Játékok III)*, György Kurtág
CD: *Játékok (Games) and Bach Transcriptions*, ECM 1619, 453 511-2 Track 6

With compositions in declaiming *Parlando*-technique Kurtág keeps the affinity to Hungarian Folklore lively. So did he in *Pendrawing*, *Valediction to Erzsébet Schaár (Játékok III)* (*Calmo, sereno, parlando, con duolo*) or in *Adoration, adoration, accursed desolation... (Játékok III)* (*parlando, giusto*). Erzsébet Schaár (1905–1975) was an Hungarian sculptor; with *Pendrawing* György Kurtág said goodbye to her.



Pendrawing, Valediction to Erzsébet Schaár
(Játékok III) (Editio Musica Budapest Z8379)



Hommage à Farkas Ferenc: Adoration, adoration, accursed desolation ... (Játékok III) (Editio Musica Budapest Z. 8379)

These pieces lead to Kurtág's homeland and it is not astonishing, that the also mentioned *Adoration, adoration, accursed desolation ...* is dedicated to Ferenc Farkas (1905–2000) (*Hommage à Farkas Ferenc*), with whom Kurtág studied composition at the Academy in Budapest.³⁰ The idea of *Adoration, adoration, accursed desolation ...* is based on an Hungarian Folksong with the original title *Szerelem, szerelem, játszott gyötirelem ...*. As György Kurtág mentioned in a talk to my colleague Klara Harrer-Baranyi (University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna), the English translation *Adoration, adoration, accursed desolation* is not the best; it differs from the original love song's "undertone".

Another English translation of the text could be:³¹

O, love love
accursed torture
why did you not blossom
on every treetop?

On the top of every tree,
on the leaf of a walnut tree,
so every maiden and unmarried
young man
would have plucked it.

Because I too plucked it
and I let it slip away.
I too plucked it
and I let it slip away. [...]

! Video youtube: *Sebestyén Márta: Szerelem, szerelem, játszott gyötirelem...*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YD02V5Lb2sY>

In Kurtág's version, the lively, escalating middle section (*Giusto*) is framed by narrative parts (*Parlando*). As György Kurtág mentioned in a talk with Bálint András Varga, it was the recording of an old peasant first playing the flute and then singing the original song, which inspired him to that subtle miniature.

! Audio: *Adoration, adoration, accursed desolation ...* (Játékok III), Márta Kurtág
CD: *Játékok (Games) and Bach Transcriptions*, ECM 1619, 453 511-2 Track 31

Fotnoter side 39.

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