

KURTÁG'S *JÁTEKOK*: PLAYING GAMES WITH TRADITION

by

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ABSTRACT

This study approaches the compilation of piano pieces known under the general title *Játékok (or Games)*, which was written by the Hungarian composer György Kurtág. Started in 1973, the set reflects the political context of Hungary under Soviet domination, as well as its posterior dissolution, also revealing the composer's sensitivity and openness to create in a moment of historical and aesthetic transition. In analyzing how the collection achieved a synthesis between the radical experiments of the *avant-garde* and the canonic repertoire, it focus on the cultural symbols he manipulates within his music, juxtaposing elements from several layers of tradition.

The concept of musical games unfolds in different ways. They can be analyzed as performative games, in which 'playing' is interpreted as the more obvious act of performing the pieces, but also related to the idea of 'playfulness', therefore treating the piano almost as a toy, exploring all possibilities of movement. Another even larger group is represented by those pieces treated as compositional and/or cultural games. Here, the composer is 'playing' with tradition, alluding to other composers, artists and historical practices, and by consequence also relocating the cultural meaning embedded in those borrowings.

This research concludes focusing on the private games, in which people, colleagues and facts from the composer's personal life stimulate his own composition. The last section analyses the process of transmutation from a pedagogical series to the increasing exposure of his private world and frequent references to loss, identifying certain recurrent patterns occurring already in the first volumes.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Motivations

The object of this study is the eight-volume compilation of piano pieces known under the general title *Játékok* (also referenced as *Games*), which was written by the Hungarian composer György Kurtág (b. 1926). The first four volumes were published in 1979, with the subsequent ones being added between 1997 and 2010. *Games* is considered by many as one of the most important sets of piano pieces written during the last quarter of the twentieth century, and Kurtág has been placed, along with his friend György Ligeti, among the most prominent composers coming from Hungary after World War II. It also can be said that Kurtág is the only composer to have lived through Hungary's communist regime (1949–89) and still be able to achieve international recognition. Pianists of the caliber of Zoltán Kocsis,¹ Pierre-Laurent Aimard, and Leif Ove Andsnes, among many others, have been performing selections of *Játékok* in major concert halls around the world. There seems to be, however, a less awareness of the collection amongst the general public, as well as among many professional musicians. At first sight, it may reflect a general 'state of things', or 'cultural climate' within the specific realm of classical music, which has been definitely favoring a more or less standardized and, in the case of many conservatories, practically institutionalized repertoire since the last decades (or even the last century). On the other

¹ Zoltán Kocsis' *Recital at La Roque d'Anthéron* (Part 4/7; Kurtág), accessed December 12, 2013. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHN58vAf3Y8&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

hand, the inestimable rediscovery in the last century by musicologists and specialists of the great masters of early music, seems not to have found an equivalent in the piano world. Instead, in the attempt to expand an already vast list, pianists have rescued composers or works of lesser significance, mainly from the classical and romantic periods, whose qualities bring, in my opinion, a 'refreshing' but often unfulfilling musical experience.

Thus the study of Kurtág's *Games*, a synthesis between the radical experiments of the *avant-garde* and the canonic repertoire, offers an excellent opportunity to assess the music of our more recent past. His recurring allusions of a wide range of composers, genres and styles within the eight volumes that constitute *Játékok* display an eclectic curiosity, and the incredible variety of references reflects an accumulation of musical and extra-musical influences, ranging from medieval plainchant to Boulez, from Duchamp's *ready-mades* to Soviet poetry. Therefore, grasping Kurtág's style demands above all a focus on the cultural symbols he borrows and manipulates within his music. In understanding this network of cultural associations, one is dealing with central issues of contemporary music, as Tim Rutherford-Johnson summarizes:

In a musical world in which all the foundations to our understanding of music - scale, sound, rhythm and tonality - have been removed, with what are we left? How can composers be identified within this world as creative personalities, and how much of their experience of it can they communicate to us? It is questions such as these which are confronted by Kurtág, and eloquently, diversely and wittily answered in his *Játékok*.²

² Tim Rutherford Johnson, "Playing Games: Reference, Reflection and Teaching the Unknowable in Kurtág's *Játékok*" (Master's Thesis, Goldsmith College, London, 1999), 77.

Although the musical past is going to be an inevitable influence for almost any composer, except those who consciously tried to avoid it, like Boulez or even Cage, the present study is going to analyze how Kurtág achieved an individual voice by developing a very sophisticated approach to borrowing and quotation, juxtaposing elements from several layers of music tradition.

Gouveia points out that *Játékok* displays a very particular relationship with tradition, in contrast to a predominantly vanguardist approach to composition by many of Kurtág's contemporaries.³ In recitals throughout the world, the composer and his wife, Márta,⁴ have been featuring selections of *Játékok* alternated with his own transcriptions for piano four-hands of Bach's works, a relevant fact to how he places his music (and himself) as part of the continuous stream of European art music traced back to such figures as the Baroque composer Heinrich Schütz.⁵ Music critics have provided a similar view, as Tom Service exemplifies, commenting on one of these recitals for the British newspaper "The Guardian" in 2013:

What you're seeing is private, intimate music making raised to the level of a joyous miracle. It's one of the treasures of 20th- and 21st-century music. [...] This can only give you a small slice of Kurtág's world. [...] [He] has composed a huge catalogue that resonates with the music of the past he loves most – Bach, Schubert, Schumann, Beethoven, Bartók, Webern.⁶

³ Horácio de Oliveira Caldas Gouveia, "Os Jogos (Játékok) de György Kurtág Para Piano: Corpo e Gesto Numa Perspectiva Lúdica." (PhD diss., University of São Paulo, 2010), 113.

⁴ *Duo Márta et György Kurtág*, Bach / Kurtág, accessed December 15, 2013.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g319gW5_00o&feature=youtu.be

⁵ Willson has demonstrated that through her analysis of *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza* Op. 7, for soprano and piano (See bibliography).

⁶ Tom Service, "A Guide to György Kurtág's Music." *The Guardian*, accessed December 26, 2013.
<http://www.theguardian.com/music/tomserviceblog/2013/mar/12/contemporary-music-guide-gyorgy-kurtag>.

The motivations behind the search for a genuine atmosphere of intimacy seem to be related, according to Willson, to a general wish by Hungarians to reconnect with Western European traditions, from which they were politically barred by the Soviet Union at the time Kurtág started writing the collection. In the context of Hungarian music, Willson explains that although

Composers' earlier investigation of the western *avant-garde* had been understood and accepted, by the mid-1960s [...] many sought a return to more traditional roots. Kurtág's 'playing' could contribute to an ongoing hope of recapturing something, especially when he placed himself on the platform *with his wife*, for that gesture could be experienced as a return to an intimate 'European' sphere of music practice - whether *Hausmusik* or salon culture.⁷

Thus, the European musical tradition may be also read as the bourgeois musical practices from before the communist regime, consequently having a more nostalgic connotation. The feelings aroused by nostalgia seem, in fact, to be present in the background of several pieces in *Játékok*, a reading supported by Metzger's *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music* (2003), which presents the view that the role of nostalgic longing has been at the core of the exploration of borrowing techniques during the past century. The Kurtágs, now in their late 80s, have even performed using an upright piano, which the composer favors as the specific instrument for some of his pieces.⁸ Regardless of his

⁷ Rachel Beckles Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 152.

⁸ Ivan Hewett. "Kurtág Celebration, Southbank Centre, Review." *The Telegraph*, accessed December 02, 2013. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalmusic/10488557/Kurtag-Celebration-Southbank-Centre-review.html>.

personal motivations, it turns into an almost domestic scene, as the journalist Gavin Dixon comments:

Were it not for the generosity of spirit, expressed both in the Kurtágs' composure and in their music, a sense of voyeurism might creep in, such is the intimacy and scale of this music. [...] It is easy to visualize the pair at an upright piano like this one in their Budapest flat, calmly intoning Bach's clear and lucid counterpoint as, outside the window, the Soviets push back the Nazis, or the 1956 uprising flares, or the 1989 Revolution [...].⁹

Kurtág's own testimony, in a rare interview about *Játékok*, corroborates the opinion that tradition plays a large role in his creative process, but also discloses a quite more intricate dialogue with the past. While he openly acknowledges the influence of composers such as Palestrina, Bach, Bartók and Webern, among many others, he has also followed attentively the music of his own time. Processing these eclectic influences into his own composition, however, has never been an easy task for the Hungarian composer:

I've lost a lot of time during my life to learn; I wanted to know everything that was out there to know, I always wanted to be aware of what was happening in contemporary music; finally, right at the moment I was asked to compose *Játékok*, I was passing by a very long period (a few years) of paralysis and repeated crisis [...].¹⁰

Therefore, in the context of a creative crisis, the task to write a pedagogical work proved to be a liberating experience, becoming a turning point in his career. The musical

⁹ Gavin Dixon. "Orpheus Complex: György and Márta Kurtág." *Orpheus Complex*, accessed December 1, 2013. <http://orpheuscomplex.blogspot.com/2013/12/gyorgy-and-marta-kurtag.html>.

¹⁰ Philippe Albèra(ed.). *György Kurtág: Entretiens, Textes, Écrits Sur Son Œuvre*. Genève: Editions Contrechamps, 1995, 21.

solution to this impasse seems to rely, as music history has proved, exactly on the conciliation of the urgency to create something new and the shadow of the past.

As the decades passed, *Játékok* went through a fascinating process of transformation. The pedagogical roots were soon overtaken by Kurtág's need to express in music the feelings aroused by personal events. There is an increasing exposure of his private world through the celebration of birthdays of close friends and colleagues, as well as the inevitable feeling of loss as the composer and his contemporaries grew older. The music and its notation become more conservative if compared with the first volumes, and playfulness is often replaced by mourning. In developing a thorough understanding of this process, and how it is translated in musical terms, there is still much work to be done, and the present document strives to contribute as meaningfully as possible towards this end.

1.2 Structure

The following chapter opens with an overview and historic contextualization, largely based on available literature in English, French, and Portuguese. Primary sources, such as published interviews and any information provided by the work itself, are compared with representative musicological and theoretical studies in the endeavor to create a panoramic view of the most common issues discussed during the past decades. A few commentaries on these key topics, such as the gestural aspect of the first volumes, the collection's insertion in Hungary's pedagogical tradition, and Kurtág's individual borrowing techniques, are provided in the hope of shedding additional light, although different scholars have already explored in length most of the core aspects of the set. In dealing with an artist living under

the communist regime, it is important to keep in mind that many of the contemporary trends being developed in America and Western Europe found their way into Hungary through all sorts of indirect ways. In other words, the political barriers resulted in a very specific and local reinterpretation of these novelties. Based on this, the cultural associations proposed in this document need to bounce between these often less well defined temporal and geographical classifications, resulting in such anachronisms as the “novelty” of dodecaphonic music in Hungary during the 1960’s, almost forty years after its first developments by Schoenberg and his pupils. Another case of such historical blurring is the manner in which Cage’s exploration of non-traditional techniques were first reformulated by the young members of the New Music Studio, before finally reaching the attention of the ‘older’ Kurtág, who was in fact closer in age to Cage.

Chapter 2.2 focuses on a discussion of the pedagogical tradition in Hungary through the comparison of *Játékok* with two earlier models, one of them being the famous *Mikrokosmos* by Bartók and the other a less known collection entitled *Fingerlarks*, by Sándor Veress. Both works influenced Kurtág in different ways, as Willson has pointed out, though a comparative analysis shows more clearly how these influences can be felt differently. Special attention has been given to the fact that, in the case of *Fingerlarks*, it was Veress’ introductory concepts, rather than the music itself, that found its way into *Games*.

The dissemination of the collection, as well as Kurtág’s professional trajectory, are closely connected to the political changes occurring in Hungary under the shadow of the Soviet Union, as Willson brilliantly explores in *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War* (2007). Therefore, the main purpose of Chapter 2.3 is to understand how the

growing international acceptance of Kurtág's music is closely connected to the dissolution of the Eastern bloc.

Chapter 3 focuses on Kurtág's creative process, analyzing the complex net of cultural associations resulting from the extensive use of different borrowing techniques, which will be classified and discussed in detail. In this chapter the collection will be taken from its specific Hungarian context in order to compare it with major aesthetic trends from the post-war period. Special emphasis is given to the tension between the aesthetic goals of the serialist composers and the practices of borrowing as they occur in Kurtág's music.

Chapter 4 is the most specific section of this document, analyzing how the collection has changed throughout the years. It focuses mainly on Kurtág's increasing exposure of his private world and frequent references to loss. An interesting comparative analysis is provided between Kurtág and Liszt's respective late styles, having as a point of departure Kurtág's *Kondor Rock (in the manner of the aging Liszt)*. Firstly, this analysis attempts to identify specific traces of Liszt's late music to which Kurtág is referring, and then suggests several instances of how these elements are incorporated by Kurtág in his own works. In parallel, the chapter also discusses some common musical features of what I define as Kurtág's "music of loss", identifying certain recurrent patterns throughout the collection.

1.3 Overview of the Literature

The last thirty years have witnessed an increasing volume of publications discussing the music of György Kurtág. Although most of it focuses on milestones of his production, such as the song-cycles *Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* (1963-68), *Kafka-Fragmente* (1976-80) and

Messages of the Late Miss R. V. Trussova (1976-80), dissertations and several articles partly or totally dedicated to *Games* began to appear by the end of the 1990s. I will now summarize some of the literature that has been most helpful in my research.

Kurtág's testimonies about his own works and compositional process are very rare. Therefore, the French publication *György Kurtág: Entretiens, Textes, Écrits Sur Son Œuvre* (1995), edited by Philippe Albèra, is an invaluable primary source. A close reading of its interviews, texts, articles and discussions brings light to many of the questions dealt with in this research. The book also includes a chapter focusing on *Játékok*, in which the composer discloses its inception, process, influences and goals. The same applies to Varga's *György Kurtág: Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages* (2009), published in English, which offers a more intimate portrayal of the composer.

Tim Rutherford Johnson has written a dissertation on the collection named *Playing Games: Reference, reflection and Teaching the Unknowable in Kurtág's Játékok* (1999), which remains unpublished, and was kindly sent in digital format upon request. Johnson mainly discusses the true place of *Játékok* within the composer's output, dismissing the idea that the collection is a less important work. To this point, all his arguments converge upon the conclusion that *Games* has an extremely important role in Kurtág's creative production. Willson shares the same opinion, stating that the hundreds of pieces now spanning more than 40 years of Kurtág's life have formed "a constant backcloth to all his compositional activity."¹¹ The collection itself seems to have transfigured from a pedagogical work into something else, receiving a subtitle, *Diary entries, personal messages*, after volume 5. Johnson

¹¹ Rachel Beckles Willson. "Kurtág, György." Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed February 25, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/15695>.

approaches selected pieces as points of departure, focusing in each chapter on certain central aspects of the collection, and raising questions that are still being discussed. His approach avoids the temptation of covering too many pieces at the same time, which can lead to confusion. Nevertheless, *Játékok* is still waiting for a more comprehensive and systematic study of the set as a whole.

Horácio Gouveia's dissertation *Os jogos (Játékok) de György Kurtág para piano: corpo e gesto numa perspectiva lúdica* (2010), written in Portuguese, is an articulated view of the analytical and interpretation fields, focusing on the first three volumes of the collection in order to highlight the gestural and physiological exploration of the piano within the context of its pedagogical aims. Section 3.6. "Exploration of compositional gestures" has proved to be especially helpful for this document, as Gouveia discusses in length Kurtág's evocation of genres and styles, as well as the constant references to composers and friends. Gouveia also offers an exploration of the concepts of *objet trouvé* (found object) and *objet volé* (stolen object), whose roots are going to be found in the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp, which are extremely important to the understanding of borrowing in Kurtág's music.

The book *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War* (2007), by Rachel Beckles Willson, provides a panoramic view of the musical activity in Hungary during the twentieth century, when the country managed to produce astonishing music in the midst of a continuous series of turbulent events, from Nazi occupation to Soviet oppression. In tracing a parallel between Ligeti's escape from Hungary and Kurtág's decision to stay, Willson offers a perspective on how the tension between East and West was felt by Central European artists. In this regard, books focusing on Ligeti's life and work are included in the

bibliographical list, as his escape from Hungary tells a good deal about Kurtág's own trajectory in that same country. Furthermore, they had become close friends during their student years in Budapest, sharing tastes and views that would largely shape their subsequent activities. Additional books such as Eric Hobsbawm's *The age of extremes: a history of the world, 1914-1991* and Paul Griffiths' *Modern music and after* are included to provide a broader historical background, also complementing my reading of Willson's work.

A better understanding of borrowing practices in the context of postmodernism has been provided by David Metzger's *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music* and Glenn Watkins' *Pyramids at the Louvre: music, culture, and collage from Stravinsky to the postmodernists*. Kurtág's music, created in the context of a communist regime, absorbed postmodern influences of other countries very indirectly, especially from artists coming from America. Although his style displays many of the basic traits of a postmodern style,¹² such as heterogeneity, use of borrowing and quotation, use of alternative strategies of coherence, among others, Kurtág developed his language in a very specific political context, which will be discussed later.

There are several articles dealing with a wide range of questions. Among them it is important to highlight Sylvia Grmela's "Recall and Repetition in Some Works by Kurtág" (2002) and Simone Hohmaier's "Analysis - Play - Composition: Remarks on the Creative Process of György Kurtág," both dealing with the central issues of my research. Willson's article, "Kurtág's Instrumental Music, 1988-1998," is helpful in understanding the

¹² Andrew Dell'Antonio. "Postmodernism." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed November 12, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2259137>.

composer's period between the publication of the fourth and fifth volumes of *Játékok*. "Music Theatre and Presence in Some Works of György Kurtág" (2002), by Alan Williams, discusses the more conceptual aspect of his work, with helpful commentaries on the theatrical aspect of Kurtág's music. The *Oxford Music Online* biographical entries are of particular interest when dealing with Hungarian musicians of a more regional category, as for instance Kurtág's teachers, to whom many pieces in *Játékok* were dedicated. The entry on borrowing in music is very enlightening, too. The rest of the bibliography functions mostly to support specific information or to clarify certain issues of a historical or aesthetic nature; they are listed in full at the end of this document.

CHAPTER 2

KURTÁG'S *JÁTÉKOK*: AN OVERVIEW

2.1 Origins and Features

The process of composing *Játékok* (or *Games*) began after a very long period of personal crisis for Kurtág.¹³ By 1967, the year in which he was appointed professor at the Liszt Academy in Budapest, his reputation as a coach of vocal and chamber music was already solidified in Budapest musical circles, and would soon lead to international recognition. His activity as a composer, however, would have to wait for a similar impact. The struggle to finish *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* and its timid 1968 reception in Darmstadt¹⁴ was followed by a creative block that lasted for the next five years.

The recovery came in 1973, when the composer was invited by the piano teacher Marianne Teöke to collaborate with other prominent Hungarian composers on an album of piano pieces for children entitled *Tarka-barka* (published by *Editio Musica Budapest* in 1977). For a country that has devoted so much attention to music pedagogy, in a tradition modeled mainly on Bartók and Kodály, it was not uncommon for established contemporary composers to receive an invitation to write new educational works. According to Johnson, “Hungarian music teachers now attach a great importance to the learning of Hungarian

¹³ Philippe Albèra, ed., *György Kurtág: Entretiens, Textes, Écrits Sur Son Œuvre*, (Genève: Editions Contrechamps, 1995), 21.

¹⁴ Rachel Beckles Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 125.

works by their pupils as early as possible, and this probably stems from Kodály's insistence that children should learn the music of their homeland first."¹⁵ Kurtág's contribution came through *Elő-Játékok* ('Pre-Games'), a group of nineteen short works for solo piano. Kurtág's response to the task of writing for children was very distinct from those of his colleagues participating in the album. Instead of focusing on conventional piano technique, he favored a modern approach based on musical gesture that demanded the use of the whole body in the act of performing, thereby preparing the ground for *Games*.¹⁶ Around the same time Kurtág was also conferred with the Kossuth prize, the highest honor for a composer in Hungary. The impulse generated by the line-up of these events was described in a book of interviews to Bálint András Varga:

I received the news that the Kossuth prize had been conferred on me. It came at a time when I had for years been in the throes of creative paralysis, I was in a state of utter distress. When my son suggested that I should take my wife Márta to Italy from the prize money, I did not have the slightest inclination to do so: with my soul dirty from the idleness imposed on me, I did not deserve a visit to Italy. But my family persuaded me, and I received impulses that were to prove of utmost significance for my later work. Florence and Assisi in particular impressed me no end. And, in Bologna, Zoltán Peskó and I drank a cup of coffee that was to wake me for a year and a half. The visit to Italy was followed by the one to Transylvania. The impact of those experiences must have played a decisive role in the liberation from my tormenting creative paralysis: I began to write *Játékok*.¹⁷

¹⁵ Tim Rutherford Johnson, "Playing Games: Reference, Reflection and Teaching the Unknowable in Kurtág's *Játékok*" (Master's Thesis, Goldsmith College, London, 1999), 14-15.

¹⁶ Horácio de Oliveira Caldas Gouveia, "Os Jogos (*Játékok*) de György Kurtág Para Piano: Corpo e Gesto Numa Perspectiva Lúdica." (PhD diss., University of São Paulo, 2010), 15.

¹⁷ Bálint András Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages*, (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 43.

Looking back, Kurtág described *Játékok* as his new Opus 1, in allusion to his String Quartet Op. 1 from 1959, another milestone inaugurating his first period of maturity. As Grmela described, the second period is characterized by a move toward extreme brevity in movements and simplicity of musical ideas,¹⁸ in which “the language becomes freer - no longer tied to loose serialism and often breaking away from regular rhythm.”¹⁹ Suddenly there was no system; the music had to be invented anew each time, even if in the end, as the composer states, “one might prove to have traveled along a much well-trodden path.”²⁰ Ideas would be generated by raw materials. “There is no chromaticism, only a C in the middle of the keyboard. One can try to find notes around it,”²¹ states the composer. Aspects of this new direction in Kurtág’s musical language can be found in the Eight Piano Pieces, op. 3, from 1960, exploring the specific task of writing short pieces moving from C to C#. At the beginning of the twentieth-first century, *Games*’s importance as a laboratory of ideas permeating all of Kurtág’s subsequent music is indisputable, becoming one of the most significant contributions to the contemporary piano repertoire. Importantly, Grmela points out to the fact that the new methods developed through *Games* prevented Kurtág from further periods of compositional paralysis.²²

¹⁸ Sylvia Grmela, “Exploiting Material to the Maximum: Pitch Structure and recall in Kurtág’s Instrumental Music” (PhD diss., University of New York at Buffalo, 2004), 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁰ Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

²² Grmela, “Exploiting Material to the Maximum”, 8-9.

Any study of the whole collection is faced with the challenge of analyzing a set that was created over the course of more than forty years, thus following the changes in Kurtág's individual compositional style and personal events, which were in turn largely influenced by the political environment of Hungary. It was originally conceived as a progressive method, particularly in the first volume, in which the organization of the material was made according to the increasing level of difficulty, with the composer trying to find a way of making possible for the children the possibility of fast movements and awareness of the whole keyboard.²³ By the second and third volumes, however, Gouveia observes that the disposition and goals of the pieces are already considerably less systematic.²⁴ By the fourth volume, written for four-hands and two pianos, the content seems in fact to be distancing itself from any clear pedagogical aims, which the subtitle of the fifth volume, "Diary entries, personal messages," will later confirm. The ludicism and childish nonsense of the majority of the pieces in the first three volumes gives place to a more dominant trait in his music, characterized by a rather gloomy and hermetic lyricism. Indeed the process of transmutation from the first to the eighth volume is one of the most fascinating aspects of the collection. Following the arch of Kurtág's own life, *Games* therefore becomes, in the composer's own words, a true "autobiographical journey."²⁵

In short, at this present moment the collection can be structured in the following way. The first group consists of Volumes I to IV, all published in 1979, and is underlined by its pedagogical aim and largely characterized by a playful exploration of the gestural

²³ Albèra, *György Kurtág*, 21.

²⁴ Gouveia, "Os Jogos (Játékok) de György Kurtág para Piano," 16.

²⁵ Albèra, *György Kurtág*, 21.

possibilities of the piano. The second group is comprised of Volumes V to VIII, subtitled “Diary entries, personal messages,” in which the composer deviates from the work’s original intentions. Volumes V and VI were published in 1997, Volume VII in 2003, and Volume VIII in 2010. Volumes I, II, III, V, VI and VII are for piano solo, while Volumes IV and VIII are for either four-hands or two pianos.

The composer’s preface to the ‘Key to the Signs Used’ included in *Játékok* is an important official source of information regarding the main concepts behind the origins of the work. Kurtág writes that the idea of composing *Games* was suggested by “children playing spontaneously, children for whom the piano still means a toy.”²⁶ In order to recapture this spontaneity, Kurtág’s insights would inevitably come from his first experiences at the piano: “Between the ages of five and seven I had piano lessons, and I was fond of serious music. At the age of seven I stopped the lessons and lost all interest in music. I sabotaged my piano lessons, practicing only five or ten minutes a week, because I derived no enjoyment at all from my playing.”²⁷ Thus, when Kurtág was asked to write for children, he found himself rethinking his entire life, and especially reassessing his memories of childhood.²⁸

As a matter of fact, for a composer described as an extremely serious, intelligent, and reserved man²⁹ by many who had the privilege of working with him, it is not hard to read in between his introductory lines and see the struggle to preserve the spontaneity and

²⁶ György Kurtág, “Key to the Signs Used” in *Játékok*, (Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest, 1979).

²⁷ Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 4.

²⁸ Albèra, *György Kurtág*, 21-22.

²⁹ Gouveia, “Os Jogos (Játékok) de György Kurtág Para Piano,” 15.

freshness of his own creative work. Little wonder that Kurtág also writes in the Preface that the series is a “possibility for experimenting and not for learning ‘to play the piano’.”³⁰ In that case, the concept of experimentation is not only stimulating freedom for the performer but also loosening the composer’s notorious self-criticism through the acceptance of any idea as a valid material, even the most banal. “Let us tackle bravely even the most difficult task without being afraid of making mistakes,”³¹ writes Kurtág. Willson suggests the influence of the prolific French composer Darius Milhaud, with whom Kurtág studied briefly in Paris.³² While Johnson comments about the interplay between these two opposites, ‘playfulness’ and ‘seriousness’, child and adult, as one of the central tenets of *Játékok*,³³ Hohmaier highlights the intellectual aspect inherent to Kurtág’s approach: “It is clear from the composer’s own remarks on ‘play’ in the *Játékok* that we are not dealing with insignificant or secondary pieces, or mere entertainment pieces in the works called ‘Games’.” On the contrary, Kurtág’s child-like experimentations are incorporating consciously or not major shifts proposed by the American and European avant-gardes after WWII, such as Cage’s indeterminacy and Dubuffet’s primitivism, just to name a few examples. Representative of this attitude are such pieces as *Palm Stroke (1)* and *Wrong Notes Allowed (1)*, from Volume I (Examples 1a and 1b). While conventional piano methods place great emphasis on accurate finger action starting

³⁰ Kurtág, “Key to the Signs Used.”

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Rachel Beckles Willson. “Kurtág, György.” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online.* Oxford University Press, accessed July 2, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/15695>.

³³ Johnson, “Playing Games”, 58-9.

from the middle range of the keyboard, these pieces go in the opposite direction, demanding the use of contemporary techniques such as palm strokes ranging the entire keyboard.

Example 1a

Tenyeres (1)

Mit den Handflächen (1) Palm Stroke (1)

The musical score for 'Tenyeres (1)' is presented in two systems. The first system begins with the tempo marking '(con moto)' and the dynamic marking 'f'. It features a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The right hand plays a series of chords and single notes, while the left hand plays a bass line. An 8-measure rest is indicated above the first measure of the right hand. The second system continues the piece, starting with a dynamic marking of 'p dolce' and a crescendo leading to 'molto ff'. It includes a large chordal structure in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. An 8-measure rest is indicated below the first measure of the left hand. The score concludes with a final chord in the right hand.

Example 1b

Melléütni szabad (1)

Danebenhauen ist erlaubt (1) Wrong Notes Allowed (1)

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system is marked '(con moto)' and 'f'. It features a treble and bass staff with various notes and rests. A dashed line connects a note in the treble staff to a note in the bass staff, labeled 'simile'. The second system is marked 'p dolce' and 'molto ff'. It also features a treble and bass staff. A dashed line connects a note in the treble staff to a note in the bass staff, labeled 'simile'. The score includes dynamic markings, articulation marks, and a '3' in a circle in the first system.

It is important to observe that although the notation and title are not the same, the two pieces are linked by the same basic gestures. In that regard, Kurtág explains that in general the first volume of *Játékok* is structured in a way that both pages are complementary: the left page contains free movement with clusters, the gesture and approximated register becoming more important than the pitch material, which will then be refined by more exactly defined tasks by the next piece on the right page.³⁴

Kurtág uses clusters, even in approximate registers, in order to create the possibility of movements.³⁵ Very interesting is his attempt to systematize these movements in a playful manner in the first pages of volume I, proposing a series of short exercises in order to make

³⁴ Albèra, György Kurtág, 26.

³⁵ Varga, György Kurtág: *Three Interviews*, 23.

the students familiar with those gestural figures that will later be explored by other pieces. This procedure is reminiscent of the preparatory exercises written by Bartók in *Mikrokosmos*, as we can see in Example 2a and 2b (Vol. I, page IV, and Vol. I, page VII, respectively).

Example 2a

(handflächen nebeneinander) (one palm beside the other)

Example 2b

(játék alapelemekkel) (spiel mit grundelementen) (playing with basic elements)

*Felkar-keresztéssel: a két könyök minél távolabbra érjen
 *Die Arme kreuzen sich; man spiele soweit die Arme reichen.
 *By crossing the upper arms; the two elbows should reach as far as possible

**tenyér-glissando
 **Handflächen-glissando
 **palm-glissando

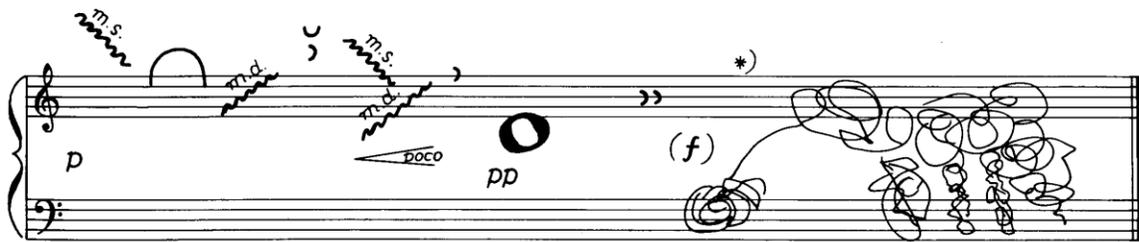
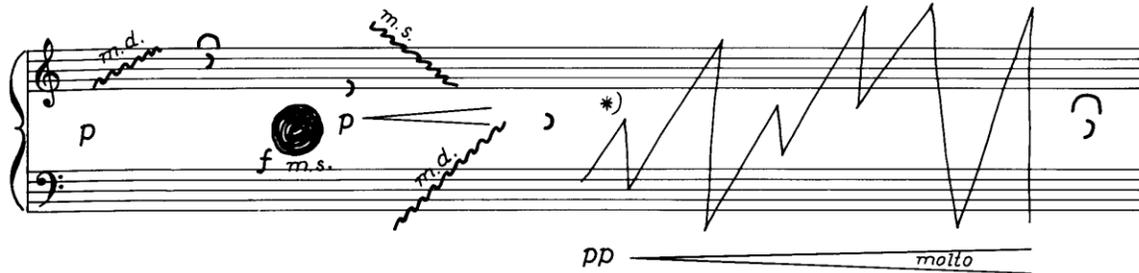
Although the register and the make-up of the cluster (whether white notes, black notes or chromatic) are specified in many pieces, Cage's influence can be felt by the fact that precise dimensions of each cluster are indeterminable. According to Johnson, "Although one must differentiate between clusters played with the various parts of the hand and arm as distinct physical gestures, the net acoustic results - indeterminate clusters - are arguably the same for most of the different techniques."³⁶ Thus, the gesture is more important than the pitch material or melodic content, and even "wrong notes are allowed." Compared with Dubuffet's art works from years earlier, Kurtág is seeking a state of innocence and amazement towards the most basic, formative elements of Western music. In fact, while Dubuffet is, according to Goldwater, discarding the "traditional means (perspective, proportion, and fine drawing) and traditional concepts of the artistic (conventional beauty and accepted subjects) in favor of the simplest frontal and profile views,"³⁷ Kurtág in turn discards melodic contour, counterpoint, harmony, chromaticism and even measured rhythm, achieving something equivalent in music. In this context, the role of the visual aspect of notation becomes extremely important, as *Hommage à Bálint Endre* (Volume II, Page 1) exemplifies so well.

Example 3

³⁶ Johnson, "Playing Games," 49.

³⁷ Robert John Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 210.

Hommage à Bálint Endre



*Az ábra sűrűségének arányában, többféle játékmóddal rögtönözzünk
 * Der Dichte der Abbildung entsprechend improvisiere man mit verschiedenen Spielarten
 *Improvise in various manners of performance in proportion to the density of the drawing

Endre Bálint also incorporated memories of childhood in his works, depicting dream-like landscapes juxtaposed to frightening figures and shapes. In fact, his paintings were used to illustrate volumes V to VIII of *Játékok*, which reveals the importance that his art, and visual arts in general, had for Kurtág. Nevertheless, other composers shared this increasing attention to the visual aspect of the musical score. Stockhausen discussed the emancipation of the graphic from the acoustic element, as exemplified by some works of Cage, who even exhibited his scores as graphic art in 1958, and especially those by the Italian composer Sylvano Bussotti, whose scores challenged even more systematically the conventions of musical notation. According to Griffiths, the transcendence of pure

functionality in Bussotti's notation exhibit "a creative draughtsmanship not hitherto associated with the business of composing. In his case, however, the extravagant appearance of the music would appear to serve a function in exciting not only the reader's imagination but also that flamboyant behavior he expects of his performers."³⁸

The influence of *art brut* (meaning "raw art"), a term coined by the same Dubuffet referring to the art produced by non-professionals working outside aesthetic norms such as psychiatric patients, prisoners, and children, can also be felt through Kurtág's inclusion of *The Bunny and the Fox* (Volume I, Page 9), a piece composed by his six year old student Kriztina Tákacs (Example 4).

Example 4

³⁸ Paul Griffiths, *Modern music: the avant-garde since 1945*, (New York: G. Braziller, 1981), 126-7.

A nyuszó és a róka

Takács Krisztina 6 éves korában írta

Das Häschen und der Fuchs

Von der 6-jährigen Krisztina Takács komponiert

The Bunny and the Fox

Composed by Krisztina Takács aged 6.

pp

Lopakodik a róka, a tisztába érve
körülnéz.

*Der Fuchs schleicht sich heran, auf der
Lichtung blickt er sich um.*

The creeping fox, arriving at the glade,
looks around.

Szalad a nyuszó is a tisztás felé. Körülnéz.

Auch das Häschen läuft zur Lichtung. Es blickt sich um.

The Bunny also runs toward the glade. He looks
around.

f

pp

fff

A róka üldözi a nyuszt.
Der Fuchs verfolgt das Häschen.
The fox pursues the Bunny.

A vadász elkergeti a rókát és ...
Der Jäger vertreibt den Fuchs und ...
The hunter chases off the fox and ...

lő!
schießt!
shoots!

Z. 8377

2.2. Theatre of Music

As we could see above, the apparent simplicity of texture in the pieces can be misleading. In fact, as Johnson comments, there is maximization of the performative aspect, related to a conceptualization of *theatrical gesture* in music, in which the performer becomes a decisive part of the work:

The extra interpretative layer forced upon the performer by Kurtág's performance directions encourages him or her to engage more intelligently with the music than its elementary surface would suggest is possible. Unless they fully interpret the visual aspect of this piece as a theatrical act *in itself*, and not merely a distraction necessary to the aural creation of the piece - as one can read a gesticulating conductor, for example - the audience will certainly lose a vital element of this work's intentions. In fact, this is music which probably means most to the performers who are connecting notes, phrases and lines themselves through the physical arcs of their arms through the air, rather than simply through acoustic relationships of pitch and rhythm which become equally meaningful to both performer and audience. This is an experience with which all performers can empathize, and from which they all can learn: in one way this is how Kurtág bridges the gap between the technical exercise for the child, and the challenging work for the professional.³⁹

In other words, Kurtág is stimulating the pianist not only to develop his musical skills, but also to consciously think in terms of performance in its broader meaning. Williams supports this view, observing that "even in the first volume of *Játékok*, one can see Kurtág beginning to think about the performer's situation on stage, about the nature of performance itself." He goes on to say that "obviously the main purpose of such pieces is the development of a sense of expressive potential of the piano, without being hampered by concern for the notes alone [...] Kurtág is prepared to explore the physical gesture of the musician, not in this

³⁹ Johnson, "Playing Games," 58-9.

case on stage, but certainly before an audience of at least one. Here we move beyond the musical gesture and on towards what one might call the ‘theatre of music.’”⁴⁰ Again Kurtág’s exploration of the theatrical aspect of instrumental performance may find a parallel, for instance, in the ‘instrumental theatre’ of the Argentinean-German composer Mauricio Kagel. With a piece like *Sonant (1960/...)*, Kagel was already acknowledging the physical presence of the performers and requiring them to produce sounds with a presentational dramatic meaning. “Performers comment (either verbally or in mime) on their playing and that of others, or create sounds in dramatic contexts, pointing to various aspects of difficulty, mockery or confusion,”⁴¹ writes Attinello.

Kurtág’s gestures found in *Games* seems to embody a more private kind of theater,⁴² very much attached to its pedagogical roots, although Williams notes that during the following decades the composer’s thoughts regarding theatre in music would be continuously expanding, as well as incorporating the exploration of musical space,⁴³ as is exemplified by such pieces as his Op. 27 *...quasi una fantasia...*, the *Double Concerto* and *Samuel Beckett: What is the Word* OP. 30b.

A benchmark of his ‘instrumental theatre’ at this period is a piece like *Dumb-show (Quarrelling 2)* (Example 5, Vol.I, 19A). While other pieces explore the connection between the physicality inherent to performance, here the composer allows only the theatrical

⁴⁰ Alan E. Williams, “Music Theatre and Presence in Some Works of György Kurtág,” *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, T. 43, Fasc. 3/4 (2002), 361.

⁴¹ Paul Attinello. "Kagel, Mauricio." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed August 6, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/14594>.

⁴² Williams, “Music Theatre and Presence”, 364.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 366.

gesture resulting from the musical events notated in the score, with the fingers touching the surface of the keys very lightly but producing no sound.

Example 5

Némajáték (Veszekedés 2)

Pantomime (Zanken 2) Dumb-show (Quarrelling 2)

The image displays two staves of musical notation for a piano piece. The top staff is marked 'Molto agitato' and begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic. It features several notes with accents and a section of sustained notes marked *sff*. A large, hand-drawn diamond shape is superimposed over the right side of the staff, with arrows pointing inward from its vertices, indicating a specific performance gesture. The bottom staff starts with a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic and contains two notes with accents. A diagonal line with the word 'molto' written along it points from the first staff down to the second. The notation includes various musical symbols such as treble and bass clefs, notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

*A billentyűk felületét éppen csak érintsük anélkül, hogy egyikük is megmozdulna.
*Man berühre nur leicht die Tasten, ohne daß sie sich bewegen.
*Touch the surface of the keys very lightly, without moving any of them.

Gouveia comments that the absence of sound enhances its dependence on the corporeal aspect of performance. Especially in a historic moment in which pianism is relying more and more on the visual aspect of performance, this piece is, perhaps accidentally, also a document on how the gestural aspect has gained place among performers (especially after the 1970s), dramatically changing the relationship between the human body and the piano.

Willson comments that the influence of Hungarian underground theatrical movements can also be felt, especially the work of the Kassák House Studio,⁴⁴ a group very active in Budapest during the 1970s. They were a non-professional group of young people founded by Péter Halász and Anna Koós in 1969, transgressing the borders between life and theater through a choreographic style, which included “acrobatic highlights, emphatic rhythm, and minimalist means.”⁴⁵ The fact that the group was banned from doing public performances from 1972 to 1976 forced them to move to a private space, creating and presenting production at the homes of friends and acquaintances. Kurtág attended such events, and the group’s tendency at the period to focus on the on what Togay refers as ‘private message’⁴⁶ may find a parallel in the composer’s rather private theatricality mentioned above. Other examples are such pieces as *Bored*, with clear theatrical directions accompanying the music (Example 6, Vol. I, 7A).

Example 6

⁴⁴ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 149-50.

⁴⁵ Can Togay, “Kassák House Studio – Squat Theatre,” trans. Andreas Szekeres, *Ludwig Museum Budapest – Museum of Contemporary Art*, 1-2. Accessed August 18, 2014. squattheatre.com/squat_theatre_ludwig.pdf

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

Unottan

Träge-Trödelnd Bored

(ide-oda andalogva a zongora mellett)*

(néma glissando a fekete billentyűkön; a három hangot eközben üssük meg)
 (stummtes Glissando auf den schwarzen Tasten, wobei nur die drei angegebenen Töne anzuschlagen sind)
 (mute glissando on the black keys during which the three notes are to be sounded)

(glissando mintha spárgára kötött játékállatot húznánk magunk mögött)
 (Glissando als würde man ein Spielzeug an einem Bindladen hinter sich ziehen)
 (glissando as though pulling a toy animal on a string after oneself)

(szórakozottan túlsétálni a billentyűzeten, majd hirtelen, dühösen visszatérve.)
 (zerstreut über die Klaviatur hinausgehend, dann plötzlich, zornig zurückkehren.)
 (walk beyond the keyboard absentmindedly, then return suddenly with rage.)

- (hin und her trödelnd die Klaviatur entlang)
- (ambling to and fro alongside the keys)

Furthermore, this influence would find its way in other genres as well, such as 'Ruhelos,' the fourth of the *Kafka Fragments*. Here the composer directs the violinist to play in a sort of pantomime, while the singer follows mostly in silence, only to produce a final

'breathed' *ruhelos* at the end of the movement. Williams refines the characteristics of Kurtág's approach as 'theatrical music,' corroborating the interpretation of the fundamental role given to performers in the process of signification. For him, the theatrical elements of Kurtág's music acknowledge the performance of music itself to be at least a partly theatrical process. Performers are not bringing to life just the music itself, but also the idea of musical performance, becoming part of the process of signification. According to Williams, "It may be his growing awareness of the impossibility of a truly 'original' – or 'originary' - music that to a certain extent freed Kurtág to make the kind of musical gesture which I described as 'theatrical' in a looser sense, since the nearly crippling self-criticism that has marked Kurtág's career has its origin in a powerful drive for originality."⁴⁷ In other words, it was Kurtág's realization that a truly original music is impossible that led him to adopt the practice of wearing theatrical masks, playing games, in consonance with definitions of postmodernism.⁴⁸

On the same hand, the shift from *product* to *process* becomes one of the most important elements in the series. In Johnson's words, "The importance here is shifted from the nature of *what* is played to the characteristics of *how* it is played."⁴⁹ The concern about a polished final product is minimized. Instead, Kurtág celebrates spontaneity through the idea of "exploration and journey"⁵⁰ involved in the act of (re-) creating music, synthesized by the

⁴⁷ Williams, "Music Theatre and Presence", 368-9.

⁴⁸ Andrew Dell'Antonio . "Postmodernism." *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed November 12, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2259137>.

⁴⁹ Johnson, "Playing Games," 49.

⁵⁰ Albèra, *György Kurtág*, 21.

following statement: “I look for a note and, perhaps, I will eventually find it. I may fail. Perhaps the piece is nothing more than the attempt to find it.”⁵¹ Music as a process inherent to human life, made by humans, exploring the full range of possibilities but also the fragilities and limitations of human existence, becomes a constant *motto* permeating all volumes, in different levels.

2.3. **Objet Trouvé**

The tendency to work on the level of concepts is very important in the first volumes, reflecting many of the inherited Duchampian values maintained by the *avant-garde* during the post-war years. In fact, one of Kurtág’s solutions to his compositional struggle was to apply the idea of *readymade* art to music, which process he labeled under the French term *objet trouvé* (found object). The inaugural piece was *Perpetuum mobile (objet trouvé)* (Vol.I, page 1A), in which a glissando becomes the ‘found object’ (Example 7). The composer’s *objet trouvé* can be any musical material existing independently of the composer, such as a glissando, a triad, a scale, the harmonic series, the structure of an instrument, a single interval, etc., elevated to the status of art in the same way as Duchamp’s *ready-mades*, works of conceptual art giving meaning to otherwise functional objects. Grmela comments that for Kurtág “the actual raw musical material at hand was not created by the composer, so in this sense he has ‘found’ it. In most cases, this found object becomes the primary musical material from which the piece or movement derives. It points to one of the central issues in Kurtág’s

⁵¹ Varga, György Kurtág: *Three Interviews*, 4.

music, that is, his obsession with discovering hidden compositional possibilities in the most simple and elementary musical elements.”⁵²

Nonetheless, having in mind the Hungarian political barriers to Western *avant-garde*, and the decades of distance from Duchamp’s first *ready-mades*, it is very likely that the concept came to Kurtág in indirect ways. Willson points out the 1973 literary work *The Cleaning of an Objet Trouvé*, by the Hungarian poet Tandori. The connections with *Játékok* seems to support it as a strong influence, as Willson describes:

[...] The loss of the lyrical subject had turned into irony, and the volume triggered ‘shock and embarrassment’ in its presentation of visual symbols, empty pages and broken syntactical games. Within the pages of *The Cleaning of an Objet Trouvé* the Hungarian language was deconstructed for the first time, high art collided with low, and Jesus jostled with everyday objects. Tandori’s rejection of the unified subject, combined with a lack of interest in expressing emotions conventionally borne by poetry, meant that his work was read - even when sympathetically - as ‘entirely foreign to the Hungarian tradition’.⁵³

The intellectual aspect of conceptual art, such as that of Tandori, Duchamp, and even many pieces by Kurtág, is that the work of art can only potentially render meaning through its connection to the reader, viewer, or listener, through repetition and (re) interpretation. “Until the connection is made, it is but an *objet trouvé*,”⁵⁴ says Willson. However, she maintains that whereas “Tandori takes an *objet trouvé* to toy with it and reflect ironically on the creative writing process, Kurtág’s *objet trouvé* is something that a performer has to work

⁵² Grmela, “Exploiting Material to the Maximum,” 27.

⁵³ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 133.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

with, and must focus specifically on the goal of making its most essential sonorous characteristics present.”⁵⁵

Example 7

Örökmozgó *

(talált tárgy)

Perpetuum mobile (objet trouvé)

Vivace, ma sempre tranquillo

(cresc.)

m.s. *m.s.* *simile*

m.d. *simile*

legatissimo possibile

sempre con Ped.

molto

(repet. ad lib.)

pp molto

subff

sf

* vide pag. 25

⁵⁵ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 154.

His concept of *objet trouvé* would mature throughout the decades, and the composer would revisit certain compositional problems in a recurrent basis. The much later *Fugitive thoughts about the Alberti bass* (Example 8, Vol. VII, p. 14) shows the composer's special interest for triads, which are broken through the technique of the *Alberti bass*.

Example 8

Kósza gondolatok az Alberti-basszusról

Einige flüchtige Gedanken über den Alberti Bass

Fugitive thoughts about the Alberti bass

Szöllősy Andrásnak
tisztelettel és nagy szeretettel

Lassan, álmodozva — Lento, come in sogno

pp, lontano
Ped. al fine

2.4. New Music Studio

According to Willson, the local influence of another young group, the New Music Studio, is also definitely in the background. It comprised a varied group of musicians founded by students in Budapest during the 1970s,⁵⁶ which included László Vidovszky, Zoltán Jeney,

⁵⁶ Willson. "Kurtág, György." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online.

László Sály, Péter Eötvös, and Albert Simon. Influenced by the Western avant-garde, they met regularly to share opinions on contemporary music, and organized concerts and workshops in which they presented premières of works by Hungarian composers as well as international names such as Cage, Stockhausen, Kagel, Reich, Feldman, and Wolff. The group also produced experimental works exploring the interaction between improvisation, playing, and composing. Willson explains the decisive influence the group exerted on *Games*:

Volume I opens with an extensive table of 'Basic Elements', the palm strokes, elbow clusters and glissandi which parallel the Studio's process of 'starting from scratch'. The 'Key to Signs used' also intersects with the Studio's interest in engaging with temporal relations more questioningly than would be the case with standard notation - in other words, *Games* encourage improvisation. The same tendency emerges in the pieces themselves, most of which lack barlines: durations unfold in a series that performers must construct relationally. Kurtág's work here can be understood as one of the Studio members construct his own: 'composition equals research'.⁵⁷

Their attempt to find new ways of handling music's most basic elements through collaborative improvisation and experimentation was watched with utmost interest by Kurtág at that time. However, the incorporation of their novelties is just one side of Kurtág's much more heterogenic world of cultural references, as Willson summarizes:

The graphic notation employed is intended to stimulate the performer (adult or child) to experiment with sound and sensation rather than to analyze the score intellectually and, according to the performance instructions, to revive the spontaneity of such practices as 'free declamation, folk music *parlando-rubato* [and] Gregorian chant'. Some pieces are referred to as Duchampian *objets trouvés*: one plays a 'game' with glissando (*Perpetuum mobile (objet trouvé)*), another with all the Cs on the keyboard (Prelude and Waltz in C). *Games* was also a method of filtering the musical ideas of others, sometimes in homages, at other times less respectfully. Kurtág even experimented with the individual styles of members of the New Music Studio, hence *Hommage à Jeney (Phone Numbers of our Loved Ones 1)*,

⁵⁷ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 149.

and *Hommage à Vidovszky (Phone Numbers of our Loved Ones 2)*. He also found himself able to work through events in his life by treating Games pieces as a musical diary, with the result that many titles reflect the death of friends and colleagues.⁵⁸

At the time Kurtág found himself paralyzed and even confused by the intensive study of the great masters. As Metzger exemplifies, he was not alone in his creative paralysis, as it had been an important issue approached by other composers such as Peter Maxwell Davies, whose *Eight Songs for a Mad King* is a comment on “the imposing weight that music from previous centuries places on contemporary musical life and how the mass of that tradition can lead to creative anguish, distortions, and even silence.”⁵⁹ Therefore, observing Kurtág’s conflict between his creative work and all accumulated knowledge he had consciously acquired throughout his adult years, from Palestrina to Webern, and beyond, we can find a parallel between his personal trajectory (as well as the origins of *Játékok*) and the aesthetic challenges of other contemporary composers.

2.5. Layers of Tradition

Nevertheless, as we are going to see more deeply on the next chapter, it is precisely this interplay between the desire to “start from scratch” and the overwhelming weight of past traditions that generates some of the best music in *Játékok*. Hohmaier, through the analysis of Kurtág’s sketches located at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, Switzerland, has demonstrated how the “games” function precisely as a moment of rest in between the

⁵⁸ Willson. "Kurtág, György." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online.

⁵⁹ David Metzger, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

composer's systematic analytical studies.⁶⁰ Therefore, after the moment of analysis the composer enters into a creative mode in which he starts playing around with the absorbed information through exercises and/or compositions, thus perhaps finding new and interesting associations in the process.

The associations embrace all of music history. For instance, in seeking for an "organic rhythm,"⁶¹ in which the proportions are built relationally, Kurtág looked back to Gregorian chant, one of the most ancient musical manifestations in Western music: "I learned from it, for instance, how melody came about through the slightly heightened recitation of a single tone."⁶² His interest in plainchant, according to Willson, echoes the practices of the *Schola Hungarica* and the introduction of plainchant to the Liszt Academy by 1972 following the empowerment of the Catholic Church in the 1960s.⁶³ In the Preface he also mentions it: "We should make use of all that we know and remember of free declamation, folk-music parlando-rubato, of Gregorian chant and of all that improvisational musical practice has ever brought forth."⁶⁴ The sound values are systematized in the "Key to the Signs Used" (Example 9), which should be read proportionally to the chosen tempo of the individual piece.

Example 9

⁶⁰ Simone Hohmaier, "Analysis - Play - Composition: Remarks on the Creative Process of György Kurtág," *Contemporary Music Review* vol. 20 (2001).

⁶¹ Albèra, *György Kurtág*, 21-22.

⁶² Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 58.

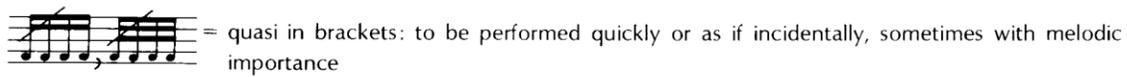
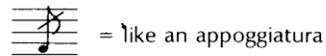
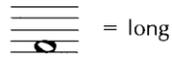
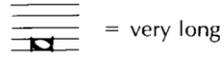
⁶³ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 128-29.

⁶⁴ Kurtág, "Key to the Signs Used."

I. Signs indicating value

1. Sound values

White(○) signs indicate generally longer, black(●) signs shorter values. Each sign indicating value is relative in proportion to the chosen tempo of the individual piece.



1a) Signs affecting the duration (over notes or rests)

 = very long prolongation

 = long prolongation

 = shortened

1b) The range of sound values, in decreasing order:



Kurtág also refers to these as “acoustic-organic” relationships, which he defines as “very primitive.”⁶⁵ In this way the composer is also exploring the importance of silence, like contemporary painters exploring the blank spaces of the canvas. This insistence on rhythmic flexibility seems to be related to Kurtág’s interest in language, as demonstrated by attention given to vocal genres throughout his career. Furthermore, according to Willson, “Kurtág was concerned, then, with precisely the sort of enacting, living mimesis that Adorno regarded as critical in the preservation of the artwork in over-mechanized modernity.”⁶⁶ The perception

⁶⁵ Albèra, *György Kurtág*, 22.

⁶⁶ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 94.

of phrase is bounded together through the classical concept of period, drawn directly from the models of Mozart and Beethoven. *Tenyeres*, discussed above, exemplifies the tripartite structure based on the notion of a question-response-coda, which Kurtág is able to articulate with minimal means, almost like a Japanese *haiku*. In her description of *Flowers We Are* (Example 10, Vol. I, p. 3B), his wife Martá Kurtág also exemplifies that:

Gyuri's seven-note piece, *Flowers We are*, comes to my mind. There you have two notes answered by three notes. The last two are the Coda. Whenever he teaches it, he points out that the music could be continued beyond the two ends of the keyboard. It also seems to seek contact with the infinite...⁶⁷

Example 10

Virág az ember... (1b)

Blumen die Menschen, nur Blumen... (1b) Flowers We Are, Frail Flowers... (1b)

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The music is written in a minimalist style with few notes. A dashed line connects the first two notes of the treble staff to the first two notes of the bass staff, and another dashed line connects the next two notes. There are also some markings like '8' and '8...' with arrows pointing to specific notes. The piece is marked '(con Ped.)' at the beginning and ends with a vertical line. The name 'B.Y. darabja' is written vertically on the right side of the score.

This classical periodic thinking, though the periods may not be specifically eight measures, is very important for Kurtág, and represents a very subtle but significant example of how experimentation and tradition can overlap in his music. The composer confessed that

⁶⁷ Varga, György Kurtág: *Three Interviews*, 54.

he wished to be able to experiment with bigger forms, but he was never able to bring it off.⁶⁸ Johnson observes that the tripartite form in Kurtág's music may occur even if he is dealing with a single chord as his 'theme',⁶⁹ which also could be seen as Webern's influence. Willson supports this view, adding that pieces such as his first 'Microlude' demonstrate that his thinking is basic to the Western classical tradition, "for it hinges an 'opening', 'closing', 'tension' and 'release'. Halász argues that Kurtág's music weaves that tradition further because, although its sonorities are novel, they evoke 'traditional musical communication'."⁷⁰

Kurtág's references to tradition are innumerable, and very often overlap different historic layers. As we have seen, dissonant or indeterminate pitch material may hide a question-response-coda structure. Or the unusual symbols used by the composer can many times distract us from his goals, which can be in fact to revive the rhythmic flexibility of plainchant using the piano. The list can go on and on. The composer's creative process resulting from these associations will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

2.2. Models

By the mid-1970's, according to Willson, the city of Budapest was "undergoing a renaissance in children's repertoire more broadly, and *Games* was an example of how the national pedagogic tradition was coming back to life."⁷¹ In this context, Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*

⁶⁸ Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 35.

⁶⁹ Johnson, "Playing Games," 48.

⁷⁰ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

was almost unanimously considered a model of how to write for children while at the same time meeting the highest musical standards. However, its influence on Kurtág's music goes far beyond its pedagogic nature, as the miniatures are very close to the composer's brief, aphoristic style. For that reason, this section will first discuss a lesser known educational series composed by Sándor Veress (1907-1992) named *Billegetőmuzsika (Fingerlarks)*, written between 1940-46. Its influence was naturally not so easily identifiable, mainly because it did not achieved the same popularity of *Mikrokosmos* outside its regional borders.

2.2.1. Fingerlarks

Veress was a student of Kodály (composition) and Bartók (piano). Following the steps of his masters, he became a researcher into Hungarian folk music. This was the starting point for a varied musical style that combined the melodic patterns of folk songs with contrapuntal techniques acquired from the study of early Italian vocal polyphony.⁷² These features are found in *Fingerlarks*, a pedagogical work intended, according to Willson, "to stimulate play [in a broader sense], to prevent children from reading music mechanically, to encourage them to experiment with swapping hands and with playing notes not even in the score, and also to experiment behind the backs of parents and teachers in 'forbidden' areas."⁷³ Having been Veress's composition student at the Budapest Academy from 1946-48, exactly around the time *Fingerlarks* was published, the work's influence on Kurtág through its personal

⁷² Andreas Traub, "Portrait" Sandor Veress, accessed July 5, 2014, <http://www.veress.net/>

⁷³ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 43.

connection cannot be denied. In fact, we find that the first three volumes of *Játékok* take these main concepts a step further, even if the resulting musical product is rather different.

A close look into *Fingerlarks* reveals more clearly its nature and possible connections with *Játékok*. Starting with the lengthy “Introductory Words”, we observe how the composer interrelates very broad topics to support his views concerning music making and teaching. Right at the opening, a still quite contemporary discussion is presented on the historical shift in learning theories already taking place by the end of World War II, in which he criticizes the increased emphasis on the visual channel as a learning tool:

In our time people generally use their eyes much more than their ears. We achieve our knowledge more through reading than through hearing. Books, which are available for everybody, convey a certain feeling of security. If we forget something the printed word comes to our help immediately. So the capacity of the human brain, through being more developed superficially, fails to reveal the fundamental significance of things. Parallel with this the way of thinking has changed in our age too. Our cultural outlook is rather retrospective. We are inclined to seek in our judgment the historical truth, and we aim to interpret the printed text word by word as precisely as possible. The result of this is a certain decrease of genuine creativeness in the individual. Most people are slavishly copying ready-made patterns without adding their individual contribution to them.⁷⁴

Here, Veress argues that the decreasing level of creative music making is related to the exaggerated emphasis on the accurate reading of the printed score, adding that “we should use every possible means to draw the attention of the pupil at the very beginning of his teaching to the fact that written notes, even those supplied with the most detailed notifications convey only the skeleton of the music.”⁷⁵ For him, music is primarily a sonic

⁷⁴ Sándor Veress, “Introductory Words” in *Fingerlarks*, (Cserépfalvi, 1947).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

phenomenon, and the printed notes are just a limited reflection of the composer's aural imagination, which cannot be totally transferred onto paper. In a similar fashion, Kurtág touches on the same topic in the Preface to *Játékok*, but it takes a slightly different and less dogmatic contour: "On no account should the written image be taken seriously but the written image must be taken extremely seriously as regards the musical process, the quality of sound and silence. We should trust the picture of the printed notes and let it exert its influence upon us."⁷⁶ Kurtág's statement needs to be read in the context of the composer's very individual notational method: the notes, symbols and blank spaces are considered as much a part of the creative process as sound and silence, and therefore the visual aspect will necessarily be accepted as an integral part.

Kurtág's basic guidelines regarding spontaneity, pleasure in playing, etc., seem to be quoted directly from Veress, who wrote: "We must develop the musicality of the child through its inherited instinct of amusing itself."⁷⁷ In a passage that could almost be mistaken as from *Games*, Veress develops the idea:

It isn't an accident that in many languages all forms of instrumental music making are expressed with the verb: *play*. This is an innate and intuitive expression for *playing on an instrument*, which means the playing with the different elements of music, by combining them and selecting them, which in turn conveys the idea of free improvisation, figuration and variation.

In other words, the composer praises an anti-mechanical approach to music making, one in which *play* replaces *work*. According to him, *work* only becomes a source of joy if it is

⁷⁶ Kurtág, "Key to the Signs Used."

⁷⁷ Veress, "Introductory Words."

a creative one. As we could see, both his and Kurtág's acts of writing for children are dually motivated: their stimulation of playfulness in children's playing mocks a desire to alleviate their own conflicts with their craft, especially in the case of Kurtág. In a similar fashion, Veress argues that the more strict technical training should occur only in the more advanced levels, for those whose musical talent is above average. In other words, he maintains that music and technique should be connected in the first four or five years of musical education.

Another common point between Veress's ideas and Kurtág's *Games* is the exploration of the full range of the keyboard. Veress explains that he tried to use the entire range because "there is no bigger foolishness than nailing the child down to the middle of the keyboard for a long time as the older piano teacher often did."⁷⁸ This was exactly one of the reasons that decreased Kurtág's interest in learning the piano as child, also convincing him to explore the whole compass of the modern piano in *Játékok*.

Nevertheless, *Fingerlarks* and the first volumes of *Játékok* stand thirty years apart, reflecting in many ways their respective political contexts, which contributed to shape very distinct musical discourses and aesthetic beliefs. Veress's use of the "inexhaustible wealth of the Hungarian folk song material"⁷⁹ is in reality closely attached to the Hungarian politics regarding musical education at the time, with Kodály at its front. Kodály believed that the first musical experience of a child should be the nation's folk songs, considered as a musical 'mother tongue'. This reasoning was very much in accord with the politics of state organizations, and, because elementary music teaching was financed by the state,

⁷⁸ Veress, "Introductory Words."

⁷⁹ Ibid.

compilations and arrangements of folk songs received widespread circulation during the 1930s. Willson extensively covered the connection between politics and the teaching of music through singing in Hungary:

Kodály's mother tongue, moreover, was no mere theoretical tool. In 1940 he described his earlier folk-song publications as 'doves' sent out from Noah's Ark (doves that in the 1930s had found 'olive branches' in the form of schoolchildren), and during the war he continued to release 'doves' in the form of his pedagogical collections, *Bicinia Hungarica*. Inspired by unaccompanied two-part songs of Renaissance Germany, these pieces were modelled on Curwen's Tonic Sol-Fa system but also drew on the most vital characteristics of the national 'musical mother tongue', namely its Hungarian prosodic rhythms and its pentatony. In pentatony, Kodály claimed [...], lay an important source of strength that would feed the 'Hungarian of the future, the more Hungarian Hungarian'. If used as pedagogical material for children, he argued, truly Hungarian music would be implanted in their subconscious. Because music was like a mother tongue, he explained, children should hear only their own music until the age of ten. Their Hungarian essence would thenceforth be 'natural' and instinctive.⁸⁰

It is no coincidence that the same discourse is found in Veress's essay, in which he states: "By the time a child begins to study a musical instrument, it has learned quite a considerable number of folk songs, which form the foundation of its musical world. If then, at the first period of piano or violin lessons the child meets the same familiar melodies, the first steps in the field of instrumental playing will be an organic continuation of its musical beginnings. And how much more easily the technical difficulties can be overcome if they are explained in a well known musical language."⁸¹

⁸⁰ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 24.

⁸¹ Veress, "Introductory Words."

Fingerlarks can be categorized as Neo-Classical in style, using contrapuntal textures mostly in two (and sometimes three) parts, as Example 11 demonstrates.

Example 11



Bartók is clearly a model, but Veress's Neoclassical compositional approach seems to emulate Kodály's *Bicina Hungarica*, from 1937, as well as reflecting his passion for the Early polyphonists. According to Willson, publications such as *Bicina Hungarica* contributed to a process of national musical canonization, by which Veress was largely influenced: "The new repertoire was conceived as a Hungarian Renaissance, in which the incorporation of

ancient indigenous texts and melodies into canonical genres would generate a flowering of the country's musical culture."⁸² Veress's classicist approach in *Fingerlarks* can be observed through the conventional notation, the absence of titles or literary allusions, and finally by the use of almost strict contrapuntal techniques. At the end, Veress's work became far less ludic and exploratory when compared with the first three volumes of *Games*.

Thus, the similar concepts behind both works do not find an equivalent in their musical realization, with the exception of the use of the miniature form and some folk-oriented materials. Based on this fact, the conclusion is that the concepts developed by Veress in the Preface had more influence in Kurtág than the music itself. In this light, one wonders how many of these ideas Kurtág encountered through reading, and how much he absorbed personally from Veress during his composition lessons.

2.2.2. Mikrokosmos

The comparison of *Games* to a milestone such as Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* triggers a whole different set of associations. Although the original concept was of a collection of progressive pieces for the beginner pianist, young or adult,⁸³ the work took on more ambitious proportions, both from a musical and technical point of view. Bartók's collection, written between 1926 and 1939, comprises six volumes, a total of 153 piano pieces. It can be said that its overall arch, moving progressively from basic technical problems into the realm of concert pieces such as the brilliant *6 Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm* was followed in a

⁸² Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 19.

⁸³ Béla Bartók, "Preface" in *Mikrokosmos*, (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1940).

more irregular manner by Kurtág, who went even further in the exploration of the genre, publishing eight volumes between 1973 and 2010. Considered in their entirety, both *Mikrokosmos* and *Játékok* are each composers' largest projects, evolving intermittently over a long period of several years. *Játékok* covers more than forty years, while Bartók's set actually has its roots as far back as the *Piano Method*, on which he worked in collaboration with Sándor Reschofsky around 1913.⁸⁴

The combination of Bartók's natural pedagogical inclination, the knowledge gathered compiling a piano method with Reschofsky and years of experience as a piano teacher stimulated the composer to attempt a piano method of his own, though he makes clear in the Preface to *Mikrokosmos* that the first volumes differ from a conventional 'piano method' in that "technical and theoretical instructions have been omitted, in the belief that these are more appropriately left for the teacher to explain for the student."⁸⁵ Another more personal impulse came from parenthood. According to Suchoff, "Bartók began teaching his son Peter the piano, and he wrote little pieces and exercises for the boy. In characteristic fashion the composer became absorbed in the problems involved in the early grades of piano playing. He decided to arrange the Mikrokosmos as a collection of pieces in progressive order of technical and musical difficulty, he consulted with at least one Hungarian authority on piano pedagogy, and he used his son as a 'guinea pig' until such time as the pieces were composed

⁸⁴ Benjamin Suchoff, *Guide to Bartók's Mikrokosmos*, (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1971), 5.

⁸⁵Bartók, "Preface."

faster than Peter could learn them [...]. Then the father composed the *Mikrokosmos* independent of any consideration of its suitability for the son..."⁸⁶

In his book *Guide to Bartók's Mikrokosmos*, Suchoff points out that when a composer of Bartók's stature began composing his *Mikrokosmos* in 1926, he was consciously placing himself in the tradition of such composers as Bach, Schumann, Chopin, and Debussy,⁸⁷ all musical geniuses who had also a masterful knowledge of keyboard instruments. Bartók was a consummate pianist as well, whose career started at an early age, his debut being a performance of a Beethoven Sonata along with some of his original compositions.⁸⁸ Later on this reputation, in parallel to his teaching position at the Liszt Academy in Budapest, led to the invitation to edit several works from the standard repertory, including pedagogical milestones such as Bach's *Well Tempered Keyboard* and Schumann's *Album for the Young*.⁸⁹

Although *Mikrokosmos* progresses steadily through all levels of piano playing, from the very basic elements (five-finger position, scalewise motion, regular values) towards technical proficiency with such pieces as *No. 142-144 (From the Diary of a Fly, Divided Arpeggios. Minor 2nds, Major 7ths, respectively)*, as well as the already mentioned *6 Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm*, the late appearance of several pieces belonging to the first three volumes highlights the fact that the order of the cycle was not strictly followed by the

⁸⁶ Suchoff, *Guide to Mikrokosmos*, 6.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, v.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

composer, who was already performing seventeen of the more advanced pieces by 1937, before the overall sequence had been finished.

Kurtág, by comparison, had a much less dogmatic (and perhaps less affirmative) concept regarding the function and goals of his set, as well as the idea of progressiveness, as the following statement exemplifies:

Sometimes, the same piece can be used for the beginning or, on the contrary, as a piece of virtuosity, in concert. In the first volume, there is a piece of one of my students of six years old ("The Rabbit and the Fox"), inspired by an episode, a story. Many of the pieces can serve to stimulate improvisation. I have a very primitive way of thinking about music: as a continuous research. It is a way to approach music that should coexist in the early years of study, with all the traditional literature. Some procedures suggested by *Játékok* can be applied to these traditional works. Even no being a rigid method, it can become a model of reading or analysis for other pieces.⁹⁰

It is important to notice that Kurtág does not deny the importance and necessity of the traditional literature, which he also loves and admires. Instead, he humbly suggests approaching his *Games* as a complement, a catalyst for freer and more creative readings of the standard literature. This attitude seems to corroborate his reverence for the past, but at the same time it displays an awareness of the problem of introducing novelties in such an already established musical system.

On the other hand, Johnson questions the suitability of *Játékok* for young students, because they “often present enough contradictory information to confuse any beginner.”⁹¹ If we take into consideration that Kurtág openly refers to *Játékok* as a pseudo-pedagogical

⁹⁰ Albèra, *György Kurtág*, 30 (Translated by the author).

⁹¹ Johnson, “Playing Games,” 10-11.

work,⁹² not a rigid method in which linear progression of technical difficulty is strictly applied, its contribution to the literature should be found in the music itself. In fact, the influence of *Mikrokosmos* seems to be based rather more on its musical content than pedagogical aims: it became a very sophisticated catalog of the main musical idioms developed until the first half of the twentieth century, also offering the keys for understanding Bartók's mature idiom. In the composer's own words, *Mikrokosmos* "appears as a synthesis of all the musical and technical problems which were treated and in some case only partially solved in the previous piano works."⁹³ In the same way, it is precisely in this role as a compendium of musical possibilities, coming directly from this Bartókian model, that the true essence of *Játékok* can be found.

This condition does not diminish the influence that Kurtág's devotion for teaching had in the creation of the collection. Like Bartók, he never taught composition, but he has coached chamber music and piano throughout his life: "When I was sixteen years old my piano teacher entrusted me with some of her pupils for coaching. Since then I have, almost without interruption, taught fervently."⁹⁴ His list of brilliant students includes András Schiff and Zoltán Kocsis, who are deeply indebted to his teaching. In fact, one can say that the act of teaching other people is precisely when the composer has his best insights, which later will serve in his compositional process. Kurtág explains that the act of teaching forces him to think about music in ways that would not be possible otherwise.⁹⁵ The musicologist Rachel

⁹² Albèra, *György Kurtág*, 30.

⁹³ Suchoff, *Guide to Mikrokosmos*.

⁹⁴ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 149.

⁹⁵ Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 33.

Beckles Willson, who was a student of Kurtág at the Franz Liszt Academy, illustrates this with a description of one of her lessons:

At the start of each lesson, this Hungarian teacher-composer shifts from an austere, withdrawn quietness to leaping, intense, spontaneous and joyous activity, playing the piano, gesticulating enthusiastically and singing. "I understand music only when I teach," he says. "Even if I listen to it or play it myself, it's not the same as working on it and trying to understand it for others. I just love music."⁹⁶

His intense love for music will sometimes lead to severe, idealistic demands upon his pupils, which are precisely the same demands that may have led to periods of struggle in his own creative work. According to Willson, his students "were subjected to some of the most critical listening they are likely to experience: every single note has a reason, and the player must understand it."⁹⁷ In fact, this tripartite relationship between composition, teaching, and performance is the engine that puts Kurtág's musical world in motion, all connected by a fierce intensity of character. As Varga describes: "They are supposed to know, to feel that each note in the score has a cosmos behind it; indeed, that each note was born in labor and musicians sounding them should re-live the composer's suffering. The very same principle inspires Kurtág's teaching as well. Kurtág is a great composer who experiences his predecessor's works with scorching intensity. He devotes weeks to studying their scores,

⁹⁶ Rachel Beckles Willson, "The Mind is a Free Creature- The music of György Kurtág," *Central Europe Review* vol. 2 (2000).

⁹⁷ Ibid.

even those he has taught in the past, in an effort to understand their message so that he can communicate it authentically to his pupils.”⁹⁸

Kurtág became a proficient pianist, and during his young years he was more active as a pianist than as a composer. In the light of the present discussion, it is revealing to know that his performances of Bartók were particularly praised.⁹⁹ Furthermore, his personal testimonies reveal that he had been playing Bartók’s piano pieces since his teenage years, and the opportunity to study with Bartók was precisely one of the main reasons for him to attend the conservatory in Budapest. However, during the entrance exams, in 1945, he and György Ligeti, who had similar plans, heard that Bartók had just died in New York a few months after the war. Though they never met the great master personally, his music was still fresh enough to inspire the young students at the Liszt Academy, becoming a powerful symbol of renewal.¹⁰⁰

2.3. Dissemination of his works

Kurtág’s compositional trajectory and the dissemination of his works are inextricably connected to his decision to stay in Hungary after the revolution of 1956.¹⁰¹ Since the start of the Second World War and the emigration of Bartók, as Grmela explains, “the link between Hungary and the rest of Europe began to disappear. Eventually, the Hungarian music world

⁹⁸ Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 38.

⁹⁹ Willson. "Kurtág, György." *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*.

¹⁰⁰ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 28.

¹⁰¹ Willson. "Kurtág, György." *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*.

became completely isolated, not only cut off from the post- World War II avant-garde but also from the avant-garde of the earlier part of the century.”¹⁰² During the Cold War, Hungarians had suffered the Soviet attempt to force communist propaganda into their nation since 1948, when Andrey Zhdanov imposed a newly severe interpretation of socialist realism not only in the U.S.S.R. but also throughout the communist bloc. It forced musicians from the Eastern bloc to write in the simplest and most direct terms, preventing for many years the participation and incorporation of novelties produced by the avant-garde.¹⁰³ Willson adds that after Zhdanov’s resolution Hungarian composers were obliged to make considerable changes to their practices, and adjustments to their rhetoric:¹⁰⁴ In 1949 the “Musician’s Free Association’ was replaced by the Soviet-style “Hungarian Musicians’ Union. The organization was the central point for commissioning, concert programming and festival planning, and, according to Willson, the “most important events for composers were the Union’s extended festivals of new music (‘Hungarian Music Weeks’), the programs of which were constructed through panel auditions and critical discussions.”¹⁰⁵

Therefore, the Iron Curtain ensured that “Kurtág’s celebrated status was invisible in the West.”¹⁰⁶ At the same time, Willson explains that as the decades passed, “writers came to identify a leading compositional figure for their national musical life, Kurtág, who thus became an ennobled musical presence - a ‘genius’ for Budapest, but not for the East

¹⁰² Grmela, “Exploiting Material to the Maximum”, 1.

¹⁰³ Griffiths, *Modern music: the avant-garde since 1945*, 15.

¹⁰⁴ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 35.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

generally.”¹⁰⁷ This claustrophobic political situation was the main reason for Ligeti’s emigration to the West. Indeed, the absence of Ligeti in Hungary seemed to reinforce Kurtág’s quasi-romantic *presence*, as Willson comments:

The meteoric rise of Kurtág serves to reveal both a highly characteristic facet of Hungarian culture more broadly, and to offer a particular insight into art under communism. Hungarian constructions of Kodály and Bartók have frequently had recourse to messianic rhetoric, and the tendency is equally evident in the reception of writers and painters: Kurtág’s rise is thus representative of a pervasive trend in Hungarian thought in the twentieth century. The construction of Kurtág, however, was also a product of the society that had evolved under the Soviet regime. [...] Kurtág as figure of discourse was initially a product of oppositional desire, for he was understood as resistance to the occupation. Increasingly, he was constructed as an otherworldly individual, pure, and beyond the reach of language, and yet he was also increasingly involved with mainstream organizations, and became engaged in a symbiotic relationship with official institutions and their narratives.¹⁰⁸

Despite the fact that the bloody uprising was controlled by the Soviets, it was soon followed by a political thaw, and in the years to follow Budapest was able to seek some sort of revitalization. In a personal sphere, this period of loosening was symbolized by Kurtág’s travel to Paris for studies with Messiaen between 1957-58. During this year he took the time to study many works that had been banned during the Stalinist regime. It included works from Bartók’s middle-period (Sonatas for violin and piano, late String Quartets, Piano Concertos nos. 1 and 2, and the *Miraculous Mandarin*), Darmstadt serialism and the New Polish School, and the music of the Second Viennese School, particularly that of Webern. According to Grmela, “Ironically, all of this exposure to new music had such a profound effect

¹⁰⁷ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 2.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

in his composition that he entered a period of severe artistic paralysis, unable to write any music for an entire year, which culminated in intensive psychotherapy with Marianne Stein, a Hungarian psychologist living in Paris. He went so far as to renounce all of his earlier compositions.”¹⁰⁹

For the first time since 1948, the city had access to more recent Western works, which were played in concerts and discussed through different media. Nevertheless, it was a slow process, and the communist political system would still create all kinds of obstacles for composers. Most of the “new music” heard in those years was actually written before 1945, making clear the delay in the circulation of post-war works, as Willson describes:

The Western works from the twentieth century to be heard in the first six years after 1956 [...] were Berg’s Chamber Concerto, Britten’s *Sinfonia da Requiem*, String Quartet no. 2 and *Albert Herring*; Hindemith’s Septet and *Des Todes Tod*; Honegger’s Symphony no. 2, ‘Symphonie pour cordes,’ Symphony no. 5 (1950), *Le roi David* and *Jeanne d’Arc*; Orff’s *Catulli Carmina*; Seiber’s *Besardo Suite* no. 2, String Quartet no. 3 (1948-51) and Clarinet Concertino (1951); Schoenberg’s *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947); Stravinsky’s Octet, *A Soldier’s Tale* and *Oedipus Rex*. Only four of these had been written after 1945 (and of those four, two were by the Hungarian Seiber, and one was an explicitly anti-fascist work), and the profile and quantity of post-war music performance from the West barely improved for the rest of the decade. In fact, then, composers concerned to learn about contemporary Western music were dependent on new music procured privately. In this sphere shipments from Ligeti were of help, and musicians gathered around people who had record players [...]¹¹⁰

Despite these political barriers, the government showed clear signs of a complete break with Stalinism. Consequently, the tendency was for Hungarian music was to get rid of

¹⁰⁹Grmela, “Exploiting Material to the Maximum,” 6.

¹¹⁰ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 80-81.

its dependence on past models, finally integrating into the European avant-garde. Nevertheless, it would be necessary for Hungarian composers striving for novelty first must study and master the (until now banned) dodecaphonic music, almost fifty years after its creation by Schoenberg, especially the works of his pupil Anton Webern, which were by then considered the most perfect examples of serial thought.¹¹¹ This hiatus led to anachronisms, such as the idea among young composers that dodecaphonic techniques were more “advanced” than Bartók’s music.¹¹² Kurtág’s personal testimony illustrates that:

When I started copying Webern in my thirties, I had to stop in the first movement of his Symphony, Op. 21 to deconstruct and analyze the mirror canon in its separate parts, and recast it in a multicolored four-voiced score. I felt that studying this music complemented the analysis of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (which we took very seriously at the Music Academy), and should be made obligatory for all composition students (which is now the case in Budapest).¹¹³

The construction of Bartók as a symbol of Hungarian tradition against the Second Viennese School was crucial at that period, forcing every composer to take a stand on the issue.¹¹⁴ In the following years, however, there was an assimilation of more eclectic influences by the younger generations, as Kroó describes: “The generation of Ferenc Farkas, Pál Kadosa, György Ránki, Ferenc Szabó, and Endre Szervánszky was gradually replaced by the new Hungarian eclectic school represented by Sándor Balassa, Attila Bozay, Zsolt Durkó, László Kalmár, Miklós Kocsár, György Kurtág, István Láng, Rudolf Maros, Emil Petrovics,

¹¹¹ Griffiths, *Modern music: the avant-garde since 1945*, 45.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹³ Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 113-4.

¹¹⁴ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 55.

József Soproni, Sándor Szokolay, and András Szóllósy. The latter group makes up at least two different generations, since Maros was born in 1917 and Balassa in 1935. [... Other achievements and specific features of the period of 1957-1968 include the fact that the genres of Hungarian composition once again corresponded to international practice [...]. In other words, Hungarian music was once again part of the international scene.”¹¹⁵

Ligeti was significantly omitted from the list, perhaps explained by the fact he left the country by the end of 1956, following Veress’s steps a few years earlier. It does not seem a coincidence that Veress was not mentioned by Kroó either, as the composer also left the country years earlier and, according to Willson, had “applauded Ligeti’s initial step out of Hungary, and unleashed a torrent of criticism about the state of music back home, where even without the crushing influence of the mediocre Szabó, he said, the ‘provincial...pentatonic running on the spot’ was so intolerable.”¹¹⁶ However, as it could be imagined, the renewed interest in foreign music by the younger generation was soon countered by a resurgence of nationalist protectionism from the more established composers. In a more practical way, figures like Szokolay and Mihály insisted on the necessity of stylistically unified music in order to clarify for foreigners a valuable Hungarian image.¹¹⁷ The eclectic Kurtág could not be easily placed in either group, as his personality seemed to look with interest towards all directions. His openness to new music was

¹¹⁵ György Kroó, “New Hungarian Music,” *Notes* vol.39 (1982), 45.

¹¹⁶ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 88.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 133.

indisputable nonetheless, especially towards the works by his dear friend Ligeti, which had spoken to him in a very intense way since their student years in Budapest:

For a long time, a lifetime, Ligeti led me onward. No, I must correct myself immediately: I followed him -sometimes right behind him and other times years or even decades later. I call it my 'Imitatio Christi' syndrome. The first years of our friendship were marked not only by his intellectual leadership. Without being immediately influenced, I oriented my taste - even steps in my private life - accordingly to his example. ¹¹⁸

Kurtág and Ligeti first met during the entrance exams for the composition class at the Budapest Music Academy in 1945, and their common bounds resulted in a spontaneous friendship. Both came from Jewish-Hungarian families living in a territory ceded to Romania. Both crossed the border illegally to study in Budapest. According to Steinitz, they were "typical young intellectuals, opposed to the Hungarian right and enthused by post-war socialist idealism."¹¹⁹ Ligeti described their juvenile meeting as follows:

...during the half-hour in which we waited with palpitating hearts to be called from the art-nouveau corridors of the Academy into the examination room. I felt that I had found in him a musical brother and companion with whom I could set out in search of a new musical style. I liked Kurtág's shyness, his rather introverted character and his absolute lack of arrogance and vanity: he was simple, intelligent and honest. He later told me that, for his part, he had taken me for a Protestant Ministry student, which made us both laugh: I think he interpreted my provincial shyness as religious zeal and strictness, indeed very different from my real self.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 91.

¹¹⁹ Richard Steinitz, *György Ligeti: music of the imagination*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 22.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

Kurtág reacted in a different way. Years later he stated that, while flipping Ligeti's scores in the same corridor, he already recognized a real master,¹²¹ his works comprising "a self-contained, mature world, reigned over by a striking order in the note texture."¹²² Since then his attitude would be of humble admiration and respect:

In the first year of our friendship I declared myself his pupil. He helped me very, very much, but never accepted me as his pupil. Márta recently explained to me that Ligeti unconsciously felt I could never be a real partner for him. I never understood a thing about mathematics, I was full of enthusiasm for things big and beautiful, but my understanding never reached very far and my attitude to music and art is reminiscent of the ruddy-featured character in Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kroger* who keeps repeating "The sdars, God, take a look at the sdars."¹²³

Kurtág mentions that "until 1956, as long as he lived in Budapest, we were bound by a close friendship. I had the privilege of witnessing the creation of his works, and participating in his life."¹²⁴

Therefore, on his way back from Paris after one year of studies, he managed to stop in Cologne to visit Ligeti, who was working there. In a very short stay that lasted a couple of days, Ligeti showed him recordings of Stockhausen's *Gruppen* and Ligeti's *Artikulation*, which, according to Kurtág, provoked a more intense and decisive impression than his whole year in Paris under Messiaen. It also gave him the stimulus necessary to start working on his String Quartet no. 1 after his return to Budapest, as the composer stated:

¹²¹ Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 92.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

After my return to Hungary- we would not see each other for ten years- I began my new life with Opus 1. From then on, my ideal and aspiration was to formulate in my language something similar to what I had experienced with *Artikulation* in Cologne.¹²⁵

The impressions caused especially by *Artikulation* were much later described by Kurtág as “the first true Ligeti - marked by a density of events, a directness in its statement and a fine balance of humor and tragedy that still seem to me unsurpassed, even compared with his later development.”¹²⁶

The friendship between Kurtág and Ligeti, and the diverging paths the two decided to take after their common years in Budapest, illustrates the contrast between life in Hungary and in Western Europe, between those who stayed and those who emigrated. A letter from Kurtág addressed to Ligeti around this time seems to juxtapose these two distinct realities:

I know how busy you are, but if you had time occasionally to write about what you're composing, in the way you described your compositions in Paris, that would be a great help. And if there are any drafts of your lectures (even the hundred-minute radio introductions would be helpful, like the one for Boulez's Third Sonata) those would be useful, please send them too. Once the string quartet pieces are finished I definitely want to show them to you. You certainly won't like them, I think they come together better than the Paris pieces, what I heard in Cologne didn't fail to make an impact, but I think it will be a long time before I am capable of writing an acceptable piece of music. I saw a couple of your letters at your mother's, in contrast to her and you I am not anxious about your future, I feel everything will work out just as I've foreseen for many years, before long some kind of acceptable solution will emerge of its own accord.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 92-3.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 92.

I won't write more now, and I've just realized that I still haven't thanked you for your hospitality in Cologne. I still love you very very much, but I can neither say it nor write it. ¹²⁷

Ligeti, uncomfortable with the “parochial self-satisfied lack of atmosphere” ¹²⁸ of Budapest, was seeking the fresh airs of Western Europe, the access to European culture as well as opportunities. In a letter to Veress, who left Hungary in 1949, Ligeti expresses his distaste with the state of things in their home country:

Life at home, the horrors of the everyday, the delicate mechanisms of the regime, the way one is not simply a victim, but is at once involuntarily a part and practitioner of the tyranny... the unstoppable inhuman automatization, this you can sense fully only inside, in the inner recesses of the machine. ¹²⁹

Ligeti's ascension after his emigration is well known: teacher at the Darmstadt School, the publication of important essays, as well as his series of successful compositions, which even entered the realm of popular culture via Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, are products of his unquestionable brilliance, but also a consequence of a great strategic move, relocating his talents to a milieu where his art and his personality would flourish to their full extents.

Willson has exposed how Ligeti kept a continuous dialogue with his Hungarian past,¹³⁰ and how it is precisely this dialogue that brings light to Ligeti's and Kurtág's distinct

¹²⁷ Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 86-87.

¹²⁸ Letter to Weissmann, dated from 12.july.1957, in Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 89.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 89.

¹³⁰ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 163-193.

musical solutions for their respective environments.¹³¹ Kurtág's opportunities in Hungary came through the alignment of his change of compositional style with a moment of deep political dissatisfaction, in which people were eager for some sort of change.¹³² After his return from Paris, he found employment as a *répétiteur* at the Bartók Music School (a secondary school specializing in music); in 1967 he became a professor of piano, later focusing on chamber music, at the Liszt Academy. Like Bartók, Kurtág never taught composition. Between the years of 1960 and 1968 he also worked as a *répétiteur* with the National Philharmonia, a Hungarian state concert agency. As a composer, the year of 1961 was of special significance because of the premiere of the String Quartet Op. 1, a work that spoke directly to his contemporaries.¹³³ Grmela supports this view: "The premiere of the quartet was an important event in Hungarian musical history since it represented the beginning of a period when new and original works were encouraged. In fact, Kurtág is considered by many Hungarian musicians today to be the first to establish his own personal style after the repressive Stalinist regime and also the first to break away from an overt influence of Bartók."¹³⁴ Willson goes further, explaining that "Kurtág became a vessel of sounds that were otherwise still suppressed and, by extension, it became important for official rhetoricians to emphasize his undesirability. They even did this one year later, not only by invoking the datedness of his music, but also its lack of social responsibility. Even if 'honest', Kurtág's Eight Piano Pieces Op. 3 succeeded in portraying only loneliness and

¹³¹ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 115.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 137.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹³⁴ Grmela, "Exploiting Material to the Maximum," 7.

despair, according to the two critics who reviewed their premières in 1962. Kurtág, they argued, neglected his duty to make the world a better place: he was stuck in darkness, unable to move to the light.”¹³⁵ Kurtág might well have taken into consideration his critics, as in the next year there were accounts of a new trend in his music, evoking not only suffering but also joy, and demonstrating a desire to have his music heard by a more diverse group of people. ¹³⁶ In fact, the rest of the decade saw Kurtág emerging as a moral symbol, the idealistic artist seeking for truth in an ambiguous society. This ascendant trajectory seemed to have reached its highest point in 1968, when he finished *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza* Op. 7, a 40-minute song cycle for soprano and piano, as Willson describes:

Mihály founded a new-music ensemble (the Budapest Chamber Ensemble), Kurtág completed his first work for some years (*The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza*), the new ensemble visited Darmstadt for a concert at which *Sayings* was premiered, and a repeat concert was organized in Budapest. A substantial number of critics regarded the Budapest concert not only as a turning-point, but also as a moment of redemption for the nation. Kurtág’s *The Sayings of Bornemisza*, moreover, was understood as metonymic of that redemption, either because of its reported success in Darmstadt, or because of its extension of the musical tradition from *Schütz* to *Bartók*. Just as Kurtág’s composition represented a rough ride into light [...] so too could both Kurtág’s own development, and the development of the nation, be understood as such. Most importantly, *The Sayings* heralded Hungary’s re-integration with the western world. As one writer expressed it, *The Sayings* contained a quality that since Homer, had been known as ‘European.’

¹³⁵ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 123.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

However, as explained earlier in this chapter, *Sayings* led to a second period of creative struggle, and that *Játékok* represented something like a restart for Kurtág after five rather unproductive years. Willson explains that the actual reception of *The Sayings* in Germany was distorted, with no lasting connections between the solitary Kurtág and the Darmstadt group. While Kurtág and the group centered in Darmstadt had in common a veneration for Webern as the father of modern musical thought, by 1968 their styles had taken very divergent paths. As Kurtág confesses: "I knew I was too stupid in that respect. Ligeti said that I should read Stockhausen's essay '... wie die Zeit vergeht...' I got lost in the writings of Boulez and Stockhausen within seconds. I could not fathom what they meant."¹³⁷ Another different perspective is provided by Walsh, whose opinion is that this second period of paralysis was due to the fact that the extensive cycle, unparalleled in the composer's output, demanded an extreme effort on Kurtág's part to handle a larger structure, which was achieved through a close involvement with the inner qualities of the text (extracts from the sermons of the 16th-century reform preacher Peter Bornemisza). To go in the same direction would necessarily mean self-repetition. Independently of the reasons, the overall experience left Kurtág with self-doubts about his activity as a composer,¹³⁸ which could explain his subsequent silence. The solution to the dilemma would be found in the small forms, rethinking music in its most elementary terms, in the same manner it was suggested by the psychologist Marianne Stein during his year in Paris (1957-58). In this context, the pedagogical commission to write *Játékok* was of extreme importance not only for his career as a composer, but also in that it made it possible to

¹³⁷ Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 57.

¹³⁸ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 125-26.

explore at the fullest the correlation between his activities as a composer, teacher, and performer.

Kurtág has been always very reluctant to speak publicly about his compositions, although his musical ideas have been at least semi-public as an active pedagogue. In regard to this, Willson comments that “in a context within which composers were giving voice to their individual compositional aims, and within which public conceptualizations of music had such a charged political significance, his reticence is worth noting.”¹³⁹ For her, Kurtág’s refusal to build conceptual bridges, rejecting public success in favor of inner truth,¹⁴⁰ contributed a great deal to the way his music and his image were constructed by others at this stage of his career.

By 1975, however, Willson points out that his public manner changed significantly. In this year he received the honor of having a portrait concert in the ‘Music of our Time’ festival at the Great Hall of the Liszt Academy. The program included the premiere of some pieces from *Játékok* performed by his students, and Kurtág actively participated by presenting it. The exposure of his pedagogical work combined with its performance by students might be seen as an act of placing himself in the great national pedagogical tradition, which was reinforced by the inclusion in the printed program of an autobiographical text highlighting his devotion for teaching.¹⁴¹ It also suggests that, at least at this moment, the *Játékok* pieces were spread out mainly via his teaching activity and

¹³⁹ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 122.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

personal friends, even more because the first volumes of the collection had not been published yet. Willson supports the idea that his trajectory as a pedagogue would contribute largely to the construction of his reputation and diffusion of his music, especially to a younger generation:

[...]Kurtág's reputation was also spread through a network of performers and students, because after returning from Paris he worked as an accompanist at the Bartok Conservatory, and was subsequently employed as a pianist at the National Philharmonia where he accompanied a wide range of singers and instrumentalists. Already in touch with a large number of performers as a result, when he began teaching piano at the Liszt Academy in 1967 he encountered more of the younger generation. Clearly he developed thereby a wider reputation as pedagogue than would have been possible had he worked only in a composition faculty or with new-music enthusiasts. And when he left the piano faculty, taking up the post of Professor in the department of Chamber Music (where Mihály was Chair), he was in touch with a more diverse group of students. And in the same year [...] the merits of his instrumental coaching were discussed in a newly published book.¹⁴²

The documentary *Kettős Arckép* (1976), by Bruno Monsaingeon, incidentally provides a vivid picture of Kurtág's influence in the Budapest circles at that period. It is a 'double portrait' of two young Hungarian pianists, Dezső Ránki and Zoltán Kocsis, who had already achieved international recognition performing mainly standard repertoire. They are followed in varied contexts of their music making, displaying a wide range of activities and interests. At a certain point in the narrative Kocsis, who has declared being extremely indebted to Kurtág's teaching,¹⁴³ is seen playing a couple of pieces from *Játékok*: first the

¹⁴² Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 138.

¹⁴³ Rachel Beckles Willson, "A Study in Geography, 'Tradition', and Identity in Concert Practice," *Music & Letters*, No. 4 (2004), 606.

improvisatory and highly gestural *Hommage à Bálint Endre*, and then *Hommage à Paganini*, both directly from the manuscript. The next scene shows Kocsis discussing the electro-acoustic *Hommage à Kurtág* (1975), a collective work by the same Kocsis, Péter Eötvös, Zoltán Jeney, and László Sáy, all full or part-time members of the New Music Studio, followed by a fragment of the performance. In fact, it is not a coincidence that Kurtág's *Postface à Kocsis Zoltán*, from Vol. 5 of *Játékok*, was composed in the same year, demonstrating how their relationship and mutual admiration resulted in a stimulating exchange, both artistically and professionally.

A very important element in the relationship between Kurtág and his students, such as Zoltán Kocsis and Andras Schiff, was the domination of a 'guru system'. It was, according to Willson, part of a very specific Central European tradition, characterized by a sense of ancestry, in which "artistic principles are believed to be handed down from one generation to another. Yet such traditions are constructed not only on musical basis but also on personal sympathies and perceptions of moral values. The relations are thus as much conceptual as 'practical-musical'."¹⁴⁴ Considering *Postface à Kocsis Zoltán* (Example 12, Vol. V, p. 4) in this context can be revealing in many ways. The fact that Kurtág, at this point an "elevated member of society,"¹⁴⁵ decides to portray a 23-year-old Kocsis as the subject of one of his pieces displays a much more horizontal relationship, probably facilitated by Kocsis' consummate mastery of the instrument, ascending pianistic career, as well as his keen interest in Kurtág's music. While Kurtág was in a superior position in that system, this

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 137.

piece is a significant gesture of humbleness and recognition of a much younger talent, which is characteristic of his personality, but also seems part of the ‘exchanging practices’ suggested above.

Example 12

Postface à Kocsis Zoltán

KURTÁG György

Inesorabile • = cca 148-156

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system features a bass line with a series of chords, starting with a forte (*fff*) dynamic and transitioning to piano (*p*). The treble line has a few chords, including one with a slur. The second system shows a more active texture. The bass line continues with chords and some melodic movement, while the treble line has a more complex melodic line with slurs and dynamics ranging from *fff* to *pp*. There are markings for '8' in both systems, possibly indicating octaves or specific measures.

In 1979, the year in which the first four volumes of the collection were published by *Editio Musica Budapest*, the composer finally came from the shadows to perform *Games* with his wife Márta, exposing not just his music but also assertively offering his facet as a performer. These concerts became true events for the musical life of Budapest, and critics were left speechless.¹⁴⁶ Considering that Kurtág defines composing as “a strictly private

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 150-51.

affair,"¹⁴⁷ the fact that he was stepping into the concert was extremely significant, adding an even more legitimating tone.

As we have seen, Kurtág's approach to teaching and his own performances share the same core. Both are characterized by a sense of ancestry, animated by a spontaneous, emotional approach that rejects emptiness, the frivolous and artificial.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, it is not surprising that *Games* emphasizes minimal, extremely direct gestures, which should be achieved painstakingly through high personal costs and intense emotional involvement. Willson, who had the opportunity to observe his work at the Franz Liszt Academy both as a student and later as a visiting scholar, describes Kurtág's attitude (as well as that of the eminent piano pedagogue Ferenc Rados) as consisting of a *negative utopia*, in which the 'celebration of failure' equals performance practice to social utopia : "In their envisioning of an impossible truth, they elevate the condition of failure to a 'necessary condition', a 'vision' prerequisite for anyone striving to perform a piece of music. Their stance embodies both a Central European identity construction and an interpretative 'tradition', the latter defined by local influences on musical practice. There is, then, a social function to the glorified failure on which their interpretative practice depends."¹⁴⁹ The same concept of failure seems to apply to Kurtág's creative work, as Varga describes: "Hesitation

¹⁴⁷ Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, 34.

¹⁴⁸ Willson, "A Study in Geography, 'Tradition', and Identity in Concert Practice," 611-13.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 613.

is a basic attitude for him and, in a way, some of his compositions are all about seeking after something and probably not finding it.”¹⁵⁰

During the 1980’s the state of things would change. The Soviet Union’s economic crisis would lead to *perestroika* and *glasnost* under the initiative of Mikhail Gorbachev. This openness had reflections in Hungary, and Budapest’s art scene witnessed increasing international traffic and access to new repertoires from abroad. A symbolic event was John Cage’s visit to the Bartók Seminar in 1986. On the other hand, the possibility to travel more freely dissipated the focus of new music activities in the Hungarian capital, and it became common for musicians to travel to neighbor countries. Willson explains that “the vitality of the musical sphere had been dependent on the regime’s physical and intellectual containment coupled with the musician’s determination to compensate for it.”¹⁵¹ Very interestingly, this loosening of political restrictions generated the emergence of a wave of neo-romanticism, which was soon criticized and associated with nostalgia. By the end of the decade, commentators and younger composers, remarkably, considered the Hungarian musical scene unsatisfactory.

In this context, Kurtág’s figure had achieved the status of a living legend, the greatest Hungarian living composer (being that Ligeti being was now considered a ‘foreigner’). Furthermore, he was still active as a teacher, taking part regularly at the *Bartók* Seminar in Szombathely, along with Péter Eötvös and his former student Zoltán Kocsis. Kurtág’s music had already achieved international recognition. Performers of international reputation

¹⁵⁰ Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews*, x.

¹⁵¹ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 198.

collaborated with the composer, particularly the pianist Zoltán Kocsis, the violinist András Keller and the soprano Adrienne Csengery, whose capacity to bring his music to life provided him with stimulus to compose seven cycles for soprano (from op.12 to op.26).

His *Messages of the Late R.V. Trousova* op.17, adventuring into the Russian language, was especially important to achieve a wider public; it was commissioned by the French state and the Ensemble InterContemporain, and premiered in Paris in 1981. Grmela reinforces that *Trousova* “marked another turning point in Kurtág’s career in that he finally achieved international recognition and fame, “¹⁵² adding that the fourth compositional period of the late 1980’s and 90s is directly connected to Kurtág’s newfound fame. ¹⁵³ He became available for interviews in Paris, London, as well as in Hungary, which were usually revised by the composer in order to make as clear as possible what he meant. Nevertheless, the final product emerging from these interviews was a quite fragile and hesitant artist, adding a touch of humanity to his public image.

From 1985 on Kurtág increased his concert activity, performing, along with his wife Márta, a program consisting of Bach transcriptions alternated with several pieces from *Games* for piano solo and four-hands. At the same time he kept a busy teaching schedule, also composing with more regularity. This growing recognition brought seven international awards, including the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize in 1998. He also has been invited to numerous festivals in Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, France, England and Hungary. Kurtág officially retired from the Liszt Academy in 1986 after 19 years, and in 1993 he left Hungary

¹⁵² Grmela, “Exploiting Material to the Maximum,” 9.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

to assume a residency during 1993-95 with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under conductor Claudio Abbado, in which occasion he was commissioned to write *Stele* Op.33, his only orchestral piece (he was re-invited by the orchestra in 1998). This was followed by a position at the *Akademie der Künste* in Berlin (1998-99), another position as composer-in-residence at the *Wiener Konzerthaus* in Vienna (1995-96), an honorary professorship at the Royal Conservatory of the Hague in Amsterdam (1996–97) and finally Paris, working in collaboration with the Ensemble InterContemporain and at the Paris Conservatoire. According to Grmela, there is a growing interest in his music in the United States, where his name is still undeservedly unknown. Unfortunately for the US, however, the composer has turned down many important professional offers, including a visiting professorship at Harvard University for 2002-2003.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 10-11.

CHAPTER 3

CULTURAL MEANING AND ASSOCIATIONS

This chapter relates György Kurtág's compositional style to recent research on his creative process, which in turn can be related to the more general field of studies on borrowing and quotation—a subject that has gained renewed interest in recent years. While Chapter 2 displays the clear tension between the musical activities in Budapest and the political restraints of the Hungarian communist regime modeled on the Soviet Union, here the political context will take a backseat to the more general cultural associations and aesthetic dimensions of Kurtág's music. By the 1980s, as discussed at the end of the previous chapter, there was an increasing internationalization of the Hungarian artistic scene, making the role of national borders less important.

It is the dynamic intricacy of the cultural connections that challenges anyone approaching the collection. Johnson correctly affirms that identifying the network of associations within and surrounding *Játékok* is crucial to the understanding of the set as a whole.¹⁵⁵ Based on this, *Games* may also be analyzed as providing a kaleidoscopic perspective of the current state of contemporary classical music, with its increasing juxtaposition of different periods and styles. Never before were musicians required to be

¹⁵⁵ Tim Rutherford Johnson, "Playing Games: Reference, Reflection and Teaching the Unknowable in Kurtág's *Játékok*" (Master's Thesis, Goldsmith College, London, 1999), 11.

acquainted with so many layers of music history and performance practices as in the twentieth century, and never before did composers have so many choices of direction to take.

Although the musical past and present are inspirational sources for almost any composer, Kurtág has definitely found his personal voice by overlapping these eclectic influences in a very individual manner. In this plurality of musical options, the way a composer like Kurtág deals with sound parameters, structural problems, tradition, and instrumentation reflects the composer's personal choices over a multitude of possible moves, which thus characterizes his musical language.¹⁵⁶ The number of choices available is jointly determined by the composer's perception and the accumulation of cultural references preserved in his memory. In Kurtág's case, the resources of his mental storage were built through consistent analysis, and also through his work as a coach of chamber and vocal music at the Franz Liszt Academy for so many years, over the course of which he would deal with standard works of the literature on a regular basis. As a composer and teacher with a keen curiosity and vast sense of culture, Kurtág's works reflect an accumulation of references and influences ranging from medieval to contemporary music, and including Hungarian folk music and even self-references, as well.¹⁵⁷ Although the unprecedented awareness of music from the past and that of other styles and cultures seems to be one of the major trends during the second half of the twentieth century, we can see that the composer's eclecticism goes beyond, as Varga describes: "Kurtág is open to every aspect of life: the ivory tower is not for him. He absorbs natural phenomena, colors, shapes, sounds of all kinds, literature,

¹⁵⁶ Horácio de Oliveira Caldas Gouveia, "Os Jogos (Játékok) de György Kurtág Para Piano: Corpo e Gesto Numa Perspectiva Lúdica." (PhD diss., University of São Paulo, 2010), 61-62.

¹⁵⁷ Sylvia Grmela "Recall and Repetition in Some Works by Kurtág," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, T. 43, Fasc. 3/4 (2002), 371.

architecture, music of every period and genre, and he responds to people, to gestures, to a smile (looking at a photograph of the smiling John Cage ended a period of depression), to a tone of voice- to life. It is all there in his music, which speaks to the listener - to his very being- with a unique directness.”¹⁵⁸ Thus, as discussed below, Kurtág’s borrowing techniques are not limited only to musical quotation, but a much wider range of cultural and human associations resulted of the lifelong cultivation of an artistic inner world.

3.1. Borrowing Techniques

Metzer has explored the concept of musical events occurring on a cultural level. He explains that, “When a musician borrows from a piece, he or she draws upon not only a melody but also the cultural associations of that piece. Just as with melody, a musician can work with and transform those associations. Those manipulations provide a means to comment on cultural topics and to reconfigure fundamental cultural relationships.”¹⁵⁹ Importantly, Watkins raises the question of how to distinguish Postmodernist borrowing practices from the Modernist habits of the first quarter of the century, such as the works of Stravinsky’s Neo- Classical period. For him, there is a continuity between Modernism and Postmodernism, though he remind us of the fact that for composers like Stockhausen the

¹⁵⁸ Bálint András Varga, *György Kurtág: Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages*, (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009), x-xi.

¹⁵⁹ David Metzer, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

exploitation of traditional music for creative purposes was no more than a sign of decadence.¹⁶⁰

He goes further:

[...] In the world of music the removal and relocation of materials has been practiced with such frequency throughout the twentieth century by Western composers that once carried the unexpected force of a cultural or chronological loan has been increasingly received as an accustomed gambit. From the last fin de siècle to the present one, the newness of the angle for the composer has continued to be constituted in a variety of approaches including timbral, rhythmic, and scalar codes or in spatio-temporal relocations. The invoked materials have ranged geographically to all parts of the globe, have been extracted from folk and popular repertoires and their hybrids, and have been recalled from the major and minor classics of musical literature of the past thousand years.¹⁶¹

Although Kurtág is making references to composers from several different countries, his loans seem to occur on a temporal level rather than a geographical one. Nevertheless, we can find a few instances in which he pays vague tribute to European national elements, such as in his *Russian Dance* (Example 13, Vol 3, p. 13).

EXAMPLE 13

¹⁶⁰ Glenn Watkins. *Pyramids at the Louvre: music, culture, and collage from Stravinsky to the postmodernists*. Cambridge and London: The Belknap of Harvard University Press, 1994, 424.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

Orosz tánc

Russischer Tanz Russian Dance

The musical score is for a piano piece titled "Orosz tánc" (Russian Dance). It is written in 7/8 time and consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system is marked "Giacoso" and "sempre 5", with a piano dynamic "p" in the left hand. The second system is marked "dim. al fine" and ends with a double bar line. The music features complex rhythmic patterns and chromatic harmonies characteristic of Kurtág's style.

When asked by Varga if non-European culture has influenced his work, the composer replied, "It certainly does but I am rather afraid of it; I use even Bulgarian rhythms with caution; you cannot use them all the time."¹⁶² The composer confesses that he knows folk music mostly from paper.¹⁶³ Nonetheless, he remembers having a few opportunities of first-hand contact with folk material, as he describes in an interview:

The Institute of Popular Education sent us young composers to collect folk music on a voluntary basis. I went to the village of Sárpilis in Tolna County. My actual assignment was to "patronize" (to use a phrase current at the time) the local amateur choir led by István Bogár. They had collected the local folk songs and fashioned an attractive program out of them. I also had time left to collect folk music myself. At first go, I only heard uninteresting, dull stuff what I was after were old-style folk songs. I hummed a bagpipe strain to indicate what I had in mind - whereupon Auntie Éva Kurdi, an old peasant woman, embarked on singing one after the other, submerging me with an avalanche of vulgar rhymes. It was folklore of a kind, perhaps, but was certainly of no scientific

¹⁶² Varga, *György Kurtág*, 71.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 42.

interest. In any case, I gave the material to the Institute of Popular Education but never made it a subject of scholarly study.¹⁶⁴

Although this early experience left him with mixed impressions, another important contact occurred in 1973:

[...]It was in Kolozsvár in the apartment of the Hungarian singer, music teacher, and folk music collector Júlia Szego that I heard field recordings of peasant instrumentalists and singers from various parts of Transylvania. The idea was for me to decide which regions to visit to hear the performers live. That is how I encountered the violinist Mihály Halmágyi-on hearing a recording of his, I sensed I had to go to Gyimes to meet him. I also met a recorder player who much impressed me. It was fascinating to hear him sing and then play the song “Szerelem, szerelem, játszott gyotrelem” (Adoration, adoration, accursed desolation) [Example 14]. I have used it in a piano piece of the same title in Book III of *Játékok*. Júlia Szego also took me to visit the Szék area where I heard some more folk music live.”¹⁶⁵

Example 14

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 43.

(Szerelem, szerelem, játszott gyötirelem . . .)

(Liebe im Herzen, bittere Schmerzen) (Adoration, adoration, accursed desolation)

Parlando

poco f
p
(con Ped.)

rinf.

One of Kurtág's best examples of this fusion between high art and vernacular, in the best Hungarian national tradition, is his piece *Scraps of a colinda melody - faintly recollected* (Example 15, Vol. III, p.28), which is in fact based on his memories of colinda melodies collected by Bartók, rather than through first-hand contact.

EXAMPLE 15

Hommage à Farkas Ferenc (2)

foszlányok egy kolinda emlékéből
 Erinnerungsbrocken aus einer Kolindenmelodie
 Scraps of a colinda melody—faintly recollected

Vivace, dolce

ppp una corda
 Ped. al fine

f

ppp

meno p

Another common fusion during Postmodernism is between “high art” and “low art”, as Watkins explains, stating that “beyond cultural fusion among vernaculars, recent calls for parity between “high” and “low” in all the arts reflect a further dimension of the contemporary infatuation with cultural criss-cross. A great deal of the Postmodernist argument has centered on

the destruction of traditional differentiations between categories: high and low, artist and critic, signified and signifier.”¹⁶⁶ Watkins seems to give a strong argument for Kurtág’s inclusion of *Hommage a Nancy Sinatra* (volume II, page 43) as one of his *12 Microludes*. (Example 16). The piece is based on the pop hit *These Boots Are Made for Walkin’*, composed by Lee Hazlewood and popularized by Nancy Sinatra’s recording released in 1966.

EXAMPLE 16

Hommage à Nancy Sinatra

12.

ff *f* *ff*

(sopra)

f, poco a poco dim.

poco rinf. *ff*

¹⁶⁶ Watkins. *Pyramids at the Louvre*, 448-49.

More specifically, Grmela defines Kurtág's creative process as *recall* and *repetition*¹⁶⁷: the music contains layers of memories, with the composer often recurring to his own mental store for materials. This view seems to be corroborated by Kurtág's following statement: "[...] I'd be too lazy to look for a score [...] I shall retain whatever I remember from listening to it this once. Even that I'm going to forget, but years later, it might come back to me again."¹⁶⁸ Varga shares the same impression from his interviews with the composer, adding, "There was no subject, no scrap of memory, no experience that, once considered in a new context, did not conjure up further important details that demanded inclusion in the material. The range of associations cajoled from his subconscious was fascinating."¹⁶⁹

Some references are clearer by the use of homages and dedications annotated in the score, though the question of how and to what extent their music is incorporated by Kurtág is more difficult to determine precisely. In the piano literature, there are other famous *Homages*, such as Debussy's *Hommage à Rameau* (from *Images*), *Hommage à Haydn*, and *Hommage à S. Pickwick Esp. P.P.M.P.C* (from the second book of *Preludes*). Ravel wrote *À la manière de Borodine* and *À la manière de Chabrier*, which can also be considered homages under a different name. Bartók, who was a great admirer of Debussy's music, also included a *Hommage à J.S.B.* e *Hommage à R.Sch.* in the third volume of *Mikrokosmos*. In all these cases, the only pattern that can be clearly identified is that the *Hommage* makes it possible to mock an almost cannibalistic musical desire to appropriate key elements of other admired composers' languages under the disguise of a pompous title. In that regard, Johnson states

¹⁶⁷ Grmela "Recall and Repetition in Some Works by Kurtág," 371.

¹⁶⁸ Varga, *György Kurtág*, 28-9.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

that Kurtág is not engaged so much in the techniques of direct quotation, but rather “the more liquid arts of allusion, suggestion and implication.”¹⁷⁰ Grmela describes how Kurtág’s allusions are vaguer, citing some instances in which they occur in *Játékok*:

Since the homages are most often to composers, their music makes its way into Kurtág’s own music, leading to more borrowing still. But here the references are usually not explicit. For example, many movements in *Játékok* [...] are written as homages to composers where the musical references consist of faint hints of these composers’ music. In the piece ‘Bells - Hommage à Stravinsky’ a series of chords is reminiscent of the bells at the end of Stravinsky’s *Les Noces*. In ‘Hommage à Domenico Scarlatti,’ Kurtág alludes to Scarlatti’s virtuosic keyboard writing as well as to his melodies. In *Hommage à Robert Schumann*, opus 15d, there are hints of Schumann’s *Kresleriana*, in the first and third movements. In the last movement of the same piece, subtitled ‘Maestro Raro découvre Guillaume de Machaut,’ an allusion to Machaut’s music is created through the isorhythmic structure of the movement.¹⁷¹

These borrowing devices are not unique to Kurtág, but in fact, as we have seen, one of the most important trends in twentieth century music. As Burkholder explains: “The re-emergence of overt quotation seemed radically new and daring, especially when entire pieces began to be made out of borrowed music, much of it tonal. The belated diffusion of Ives’s music provided one model, Stravinsky’s recompositions another, as did Joyce’s novels in literature, and collage, pop art and postmodern architecture in the visual arts. Composers rediscovered the pleasure of reworking existing material, but now the subject of their music was frequently their relationship to the past tradition.”¹⁷² Furthermore, Metzger explains that

¹⁷⁰ Johnson, “Playing Games,” 35.

¹⁷¹ Grmela “Recall and Repetition in Some Works by Kurtág,” 371-2.

¹⁷² J. Peter Burkholder. “Borrowing.” *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed July 17, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/52918pg13>.

the act of borrowing is usually done using works belonging to a pool of images sustained by cultural memory over the centuries, such as the above ones mentioned by Grmela. Metzger goes on, stating that: “In that realm, images can be easily confused. They may even begin to merge, parts of one seeming to fit with another.”¹⁷³

Kurtág’s main procedures discussed above, especially in the homages, seem to match perfectly with Metzger’s interpretation of the role of borrowing techniques in contemporary music:

The borrowed material is most often familiar or, if not so, it at least stands apart by virtue of being out of context. Such conspicuity intensifies the engagement between old and new, as we can hear how easily or reluctantly the borrowing settles into its new locale. [...] At the same time, quotation typically involves a range of transformational techniques. Fragmentation, expansion, rhythmic skewing, stylistic metamorphosis - these are only some of the things that can be done with borrowed elements. This manipulation of pre-existent material adds another dimension to the play between old and new, as we hear what new guises the old can assume.¹⁷⁴

In Kurtág’s case, this practice is associated with his concept of *objet volé* (“stolen object”), in which gestures of other composers are taken from their original contexts (literally ‘stolen’), generating ideas for his composition. The *objet volé* is basically an *objet trouvé* not found from a common pool, as we have discussed in Chapter 2, but stolen directly from another composer’s work. The *objet volé*, according to Gouveia, is distinct from usual

¹⁷³ Metzger, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music*, 6.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

collage (exemplified by such works as Berio's *Sinfonia*) mainly in how the material is incorporated into the work. In collage works, the references are kept alien to the structure of the work, occurring as a superposition of elements, while the *objet volé* has a structural function in the whole, which can happen in varied ways.¹⁷⁵

In *Les Adieux* (Example 17a, Vol. V, p.13), Kurtág is vaguely recalling the opening theme of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 81a (Examples 17a and 17b).

EXAMPLE 17a

Les Adieux

m. d.*

5 2 1 1 2 4 2 2 4

ossia:

Ped. *rinf.*

R. M. darabjia
1979, VII. 11.

¹⁷⁵ Gouveia, "Os Jogos (Játékok) de György Kurtág Para Piano," 113.

EXAMPLE 17b

Adagio.

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. It is titled 'Adagio.' and features the lyrics 'Le - be wohl'. The score is written in a 4/4 time signature with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The music is marked 'p espressivo'. The score consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff contains the melody, with lyrics 'Le - be wohl' written above it. The bass staff contains the accompaniment. The score is divided into two measures. The first measure contains a piano introduction with a 'p' marking and the word 'espressivo'. The second measure contains the main melody with lyrics 'Le - be wohl' and a 'p' marking. The melody is marked with a '1' and a '3' above it, indicating a triplet. The bass staff has a '4' above it, indicating a quarter note. The score ends with a double bar line.

In *Hommage à Ligeti* (Example 18, Vol. I, p. 20), Kurtág is paying tribute to the genius of his close friend. The elbow clusters in *p* probably make reference to his textures in clusters popularized through such pieces as *Atmosphères*, for orchestra, and *Lux Aeterna*, for mixed choir *a cappella*.

EXAMPLE 18

Hommage à Ligeti

The image displays a musical score for a piano piece titled "Hommage à Ligeti". The score is written for piano and consists of two systems of staves. The first system features a grand staff with a treble clef on the top staff and a bass clef on the bottom staff. It begins with a piano (p) dynamic marking. The music is characterized by complex, overlapping chords and melodic lines, with several measures containing sustained notes and chords. Pedal markings (Ped.) are present below the bass staff, indicating sustained pedal points. The second system continues the piece, starting with a mezzo-piano (mp) dynamic marking. It includes a section marked "secco" and "poco sf" (poco sforzando), indicating a change in texture and dynamics. The score concludes with a fortissimo (ff) dynamic marking and an 8-measure rest. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

Some of the *Hommages* have a more ambiguous tone, and the homage can almost be interpreted as parody, as is the case with *Hommage à Tchaikovsky* (Example 19, Vol. I, p. 21), which is emulating the opening piano chords of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto no. 1, Op. 23 (Example 19b).¹⁷⁶

EXAMPLE 19

¹⁷⁶ Both Johnson and Gouveia provided each a lengthy analysis of this emblematic piece in their dissertations (See Bibliography).

Hommage à Csajkovszkij

Hommage à Tschaikowski Hommage à Tchaikovsky

Lendülettel *)

The image shows a musical score for a piano accompaniment. It consists of four staves: two for the right hand (treble clef) and two for the left hand (bass clef). The key signature is one sharp (F#). The dynamic marking is *fff*. The score includes a *sempre* marking and a *con Ped.* instruction. The notation is highly stylized, with many notes obscured by large, dark, scribbled-out circles.

La fille aux cheveux de lin – enragée (Example 20, Vol. 5, p. 10), more than a simple parody on Debussy's prelude *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, is in fact a game of opposites; besides the general character, a closer look will reveal that each intention in Kurtág's score strives to achieve the opposite effect of Debussy's original, either the indication of character, dynamics, articulation, etc.

EXAMPLE 20

A megvadult lenhajú lány

La fille aux cheveux de lin – enragée

Presto, feroce
ff, martellato
più ff
meno f cresc.
simile
sempre cresc. molto

A piece such as *Hommage à László Borsody (Harmonica)* (Example 21, Vol. III, p. 41) is an example of how the *objet volé* and *objet trouvé* may intersect. The use of triads, an *objet trouvé*, is emulating a harmonica to make references to the Hungarian musician László Borsody, therefore becoming an *objet volé*.

EXAMPLE 21

Hommage à Borsody László

(Harmonika) (Harmonica)

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piece titled 'Hommage à Borsody László' for Harmonica. The first system, labeled 'a)', consists of two staves. The upper staff is in bass clef and contains a melodic line with various ornaments and slurs. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a harmonic accompaniment with chords and slurs. The dynamic marking 'p dolce' is written above the first staff, and '(con Ped.)' is written below the second staff. The second system also consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a melodic line. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a harmonic accompaniment. The dynamic marking 'poco rinf.' is written above the first staff, 'pp' is written above the second staff, and 'mp' is written above the third staff. The name 'T. M. darabja' is written vertically on the right side of the second system.

The *Hommages* to public figures decrease throughout *Játékok*, though they are replaced by more personal allusions to colleagues, friends and acquaintances through different titles. In any case, the techniques found in the homages are just one side of borrowing techniques, as we are going to see below.

In fact, Kurtág's borrowing techniques vary and may even include literal quotations, as well as references to his own music. In order to classify Kurtág's borrowing procedures occurring in a purely musical level, Grmela divides them into the following categories:

A: Borrowing from other composers

A1: transcribing entire movements

A2: borrowing a motive or a musical gesture

A3: using a composer's characteristic compositional technique or instrumentation

B: Self-reference

B1: quoting entire movements

B2: using a previously written movement for the basis of a new movement

B3: re-working a similar compositional problem

Category A1: It is self-explanatory, though Grmela points out that it only happens in Kurtág's Quartet Op. 28, in which two of the fifteen movements quote entire movements from other composers.

Category A2: Precisely the type of borrowing mostly used in *Játékok*, wherein homages, dedications and *in memoriam* usually employ either a motive or musical gesture as

the point of departure.¹⁷⁷ In this regard, Grmela comments that she could not identify a consistent pattern in the way these elements make their way into Kurtág's music.

Category A3: Overlapping with category A2, this consists of the use of a composer's characteristic technique or instrumentation without such caveats as homage, dedication or *in memoriam*. Grmela exemplifies this through some movements of Quartet Op. 28:

Although only one of the movements in this piece quotes Webern's Opus 31 directly, four other movements use certain aspects of Webern's piece as their starting point. Movement IV uses three of Webern's row forms as the basis of its pitch content. Movement V is a Fantasy based on the verticalities found in Webern's movement. Movement VI translates Webern's double canon technique into Kurtág's own microcosmic music world. Movement VII preserves one of the voice pairs of Webern's double canon, while the other voice pair is left free.¹⁷⁸

Category B1: Already in the category of self-references, this is the case with many pieces in *Játékok*, which have also been transcribed for other instruments and/or voice. A representative example is *Marina Tsvetayeva: It's Time* (1991), from Volume VI, which is also used as the sixth movement of *Songs of Despair and Sorrow, Op. 18* (1994), for choir and ensemble. Many *Játékok* pieces are also included in *Rückblick* (1993), dedicated to Stockhausen, consisting of a gathering of old and new pieces combined into an almost seventy minute program. Some of them are preserved in their original format, while others are transcribed for trumpet, double bass and keyboard instrument. In a similar fashion, pieces from Volume IV such as *Dirge, Beating, Sarabande* and *Hommage à Paganini* can be

¹⁷⁷ In this context, a motive implies well defined pitch and rhythmical material, while a musical gesture suggests embracing even indeterminate pitch material or free material under a well-defined physical motion (,as, for instance, a glissando or a palm stroke).

¹⁷⁸ Grmela "Recall and Repetition in Some Works by Kurtág," 373.

included in this category, as they are basically arrangements for two pianos of entire pieces from the previous volumes.

Category B2: Among many instances, B2 is of especial interest because of the obsessive re-use of the 'Flowers We Are' motto, which is constantly revisited throughout *Games*. According to Grmela, 'Flowers We Are' "consisted (in terms of pitch structure) of two consecutive tetrachords, each containing two major thirds separated by a semitone. Since then, the transformations have included versions that simply spell out the diatonic and chromatic scale or versions based on chains of fifths. Although many of the versions are very different from each other, the idea of an axis of symmetry remains a constant theme."¹⁷⁹ The last of his *4 Songs to Poems by Janos Pilinszky Op. 11* (1975), reworks *Beating*, from *Játékok*, Vol. 4, using different instrumentation (strings, horn, clarinet and two cimbalons) in a vocal setting. Another example is *In memoriam András Mihály* (1993), from Volume VI, whose initial chords serve as the basis for the last movement of *Stele Op. 33* (1994).

Category B3: *re-working of a similar compositional problem*. Here, similarly to B2, Kurtág looks for different solutions to a given problem, as the three versions of "Playing with overtones" demonstrate. Sometimes the pieces do not have the same title, but deal with a specific problem, as for instance, the mostly closed triadic chords of *Hommage à Borsody László* and *Hommage à Nancy Sinatra*; the choral-like textures of pieces like *Chorale (for Benjamin Rajeczky's 80th birthday)*, *An apocryphal hymn (in the style of Alfred Schnittke)* and *Apocryphal Hymn (2nd version)*; the emulation of the cimbalon in *Un brin de bruyère à Witold*,

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 374.

Scraps of a Colinda Melody (faintly recollected) and *Fugitive Thoughts about the Alberti Bass*, for instance. The list could be extended. In fact, such tendencies explore the same compositional problem have led the composer to give the following statement, after listening to the complete recording of *Games* by the pianist Gábor Csalog: “By the last book, I was nearly out of my mind: I write the same piece, over and over again. [...] Csalog made me realize that *Játékok* was utter nonsense.”¹⁸⁰

3.2. CONTEXTUALIZATION

The context in which borrowing gained a renewed valorization can be seen as a counter reaction to the serial revolution initiated by such works as Stockhausen’s *Kreuzspiel* and Boulez’s first book of *Structures*.¹⁸¹ Grouped together in Darmstadt during the 1950’s, in a time urging for physical and psychological rebuilding,¹⁸² the ‘class’ of ‘1945’ initiated a new adventure in musical thought by cultivating a musical language that intended to abolish the most basic elements of Western tradition, such as ‘motive’ and ‘counterpoint’ through the inner logic of integral serialism. Boulez’s dream was of “forsaking all memory to forge a perception without precedent, of renouncing the legacies of the past, to discover yet undreamed-of territories.”¹⁸³ However, this sense of mission in the pursuit of aesthetic renewal shared by the group soon led to intransigence and dogmatism, as they looked with

¹⁸⁰ Varga, *György Kurtág*, 58.

¹⁸¹ Paul Griffiths, *Modern music: the avant-garde since 1945*, (New York: G. Braziller, 1981), 188.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 13.

¹⁸³ Metzger, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music*, 108.

impatience at anything that proposed return or compromise.¹⁸⁴ Boulez was trying to fight against an overloaded culture. However, he was aware that it was essentially a utopia, as Watkins explains:

In a 1971 assessment of Stravinsky and his age, Boulez had already resurrected the notion attributed to Klee of the possibility of 'too much culture.' He further hypothesized the prospect of escaping memory completely: 'How good it would be to wake up and find that one had forgotten everything, absolutely everything!' At the same time Boulez understood as clearly as anyone that art is incapable of discovering essences without recourse to experience or memory, and that the force and value of the model resides not in its call for simple imitation but, as with all authorities, in its perennial invitation to the artist 'to shrink history by making a transfer of it.' [...] Boulez ultimately confirmed that "just as Klee feared, there is no escape from the knowledge of our own culture, nor nowadays from meeting the cultures of other civilizations- but how imperious a duty we have to volatize them!"¹⁸⁵

In America, the early chance music of John Cage also avoided tradition by focusing on a musical composition, according to Griffiths, "free of individual taste and memory (psychology) and also of literature and "traditions" of the art.' [...] For Cage the aim was not to clear the decks for a new musical grammar but to dispense with audible structure and metaphorical connotation, to let sounds be just 'themselves'."¹⁸⁶

In this context, the same Griffiths observes that for other composers, especially those taking advantage of borrowing techniques, "the legacies of the past have been too alluring to be renounced, too richly suggestive to be ignored, too much a part of the present, in that works from before 1900 still form the bulk of the concert and recorded repertory, to be

¹⁸⁴ Griffiths, *Modern music: the avant-garde since 1945*, 21.

¹⁸⁵ Watkins. *Pyramids at the Louvre*, 470-71.

¹⁸⁶ Griffiths, *Modern music: the avant-garde since 1945*, 67.

overlooked.”¹⁸⁷ For Watkins, “Despite current millennial pronouncements of the end of culture, the intensity of a Postmodern age’s subscription to multiculturalism is surely best read not as a naive and fatal attraction to cultural overload but as the advertisement of newly sighted possibilities and an impending fresh start.”¹⁸⁸

Nevertheless, the reception to this approach was mixed. From one side, it was optimistically praised, among different things, for its unlimited possibilities of combination. Below Metzger describes the characteristics of musical quotation at its best, which can also be closely related to Kurtág’s style:

Quotation expanded the field of musical resources, opening up worlds of unequalled breadth and richness. Whereas serial composers looked inward, tinkering with ever more intricate operations, composers of collage works looked out a vast realm beyond the row, one full of, among the infinite array of sounds, the music of Beethoven, the novels of Beckett, and the noises of a Chinese market. Tantalized by that vista, many composers left the confines of the row and ventured into that space. Quotation offered a means of taking the first steps and bringing back the music and sounds heard there into new works. The collage pieces created from these excursions reveal how much quotation had changed the mapping of the compositional world from the 1950s to the 1960s. In the earlier decade, composers charted, as Stockhausen recalled, a musical sphere disconnected from the ‘known’ uses of melody, harmony, and rhythm. By the 1960s, these composers had used quotation to embrace the ‘known,’ be it Bach or the sounds of automobiles. Their musical reality was no longer an isolated abstract realm but, as Berio put it, ‘the totality of the sonic world.’¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Griffiths, *Modern music: the avant-garde since 1945*, 188.

¹⁸⁸ Watkins. *Pyramids at the Louvre*, 473.

¹⁸⁹ Metzger, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music*, 110.

Coming from the post-war period, these composers were fascinated by the possibility of a different kind of restart: playing with time, reconnecting past and present, and thereby recovering their connection with the period of common practice. Griffiths maintains that “the more significant reasons for such borrowings have been those of an aesthetic or even moral order: the need to test the present against the past and vice versa, the desire to improve contact with audiences by offering known subjects for discussion, the wish to find musical analogues for the multiple and simultaneous sensory bombardment in the world.”¹⁹⁰ They recognized, in Burkholder’s words, “The gulf between common-practice tonality and modern idioms.” At the same time, the growth of a new public interest in early music by the mid-1960s was, according to Griffiths, evidence of a common trend in concert music: “The more distant musical past offers less problematic territory, partly because the music of the medieval and Renaissance periods is sufficiently separate from the present to be no danger to the composer for whom compromise with the past would be obnoxious, but also because the methods of pre-Baroque composers may often be in surprisingly close accord with those of their contemporary successors.”¹⁹¹ Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that this approach reintroduces tonality without renouncing serialism as a valid member of this temporal sphere, now being used outside its inner relations, almost as chess pieces moving beyond the limits of the board. In short, quotation has created a free space in which the past circulates in the present, and vice-versa. In this context, Bernd Alois Zimmermann refers to the ‘sphericality of time,’ in which past, present and future are equidistant from the center.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Griffiths, *Modern music: the avant-garde since 1945*, 200.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁹² Metzger, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music*, 111.

Similarly, composers in this vein also view borrowing as 'empowering', using the whole history of music (and beyond music) to affirm their individuality, and, at the same time, reconnect with a larger public, as Burkholder explains:

[...] The appearance of the older music and the way it is treated is surprising and novel, but the quoted music itself is often familiar. This meant that listeners could follow the progress of a work more easily than they could in serial or avant-garde music, where themes (if they existed at all) were too unfamiliar to grasp, and as a result works with borrowed material have often had a wider appeal than a composer's other music. At the same time, the contrasts between the borrowed material and the often strange ways it was transformed or juxtaposed with quite different music could be fascinating and expressive, commenting by implication on the fragmented, pluralistic culture and music of the modern era, the gulf separating the present from the past or the modern sense of time, space and simultaneity.¹⁹³

On the other hand, composers like Boulez share the opinion that quotation is "a shrunken and accepted form of death."¹⁹⁴ For them, according to Metzger, "the act is ridden with fears of creative sterility and desperation, the musician who has nothing original to say and thus feeds upon works of others." One of the main criticisms against quotation is that it allows the exacerbation of *nostalgia*. Indeed, Burkholder has noticed that, "Whereas in the 19th century the borrowed material often sounded exotic or unusual in idiom in comparison to the work in which it was used, the complex and relatively unfamiliar idioms of many modernist and avant-garde composers reversed this, so that the borrowed tonal material, whether recognized or not, was perceived as the most familiar element. Composers, especially after World War II, exploited this to achieve effects from comfort and nostalgia to

¹⁹³Burkholder. "Borrowing." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online.

¹⁹⁴ Metzger, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music*, 109.

shock and alienation.”¹⁹⁵ Kurtág’s description of his use of open fifths matches perfectly with Burkholder’s statement: “[...] The fifth is another preferred interval: it is a symbol of purity if it occurs in a context where it appears as a novelty. [...] I love open strings; I can’t help it. I use them whenever I can, perhaps because, to a certain extent, they stand for the zero point.”¹⁹⁶ Metzger, who defines nostalgia as the relationship between past and present, shares the same view, stating: “Nostalgia peers at that remote time from an uncertain and unfulfilling present. The stresses and needs of that period impel a search for stability and fulfillment, which the nostalgic believes can be found in the past.”¹⁹⁷ As the war in Europe was an episode of dramatic losses, not just material but also spiritual, and as the future also brought ambivalent feelings towards the uncertainties of new technologies and urbanization,¹⁹⁸ it is a natural phenomenon that such vulnerable people, still under the shadow of the great historical stabilities represented by the nineteenth century, would court the past in nostalgic terms.

Hungary was especially affected during the twentieth century. First the loss of territory caused by the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of the First World War in 1918. Suddenly, “Hungarians found themselves distributed among various successor states of the dissolved Monarchy, and the Hungarian state, moreover, had shrunk. Its new borders enclosed only one third of its former landmass, so that some twelve million residents were left outside. Additionally, and for many nationalists tragically, the land most cherished

¹⁹⁵ Burkholder. "Borrowing." *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*.

¹⁹⁶ Varga, *György Kurtág*, 68-9.

¹⁹⁷ Metzger, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music*, 109.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 43.

as a putative site of national origin, Transylvania, had become a part of Romania.”¹⁹⁹After that came the Nazi occupation during the Second World War, and soon Hungary became a communist satellite state of the Soviet Union, after 1949.

If we reconsider Kurtág’s recurrent crisis and creative paralysis through this light, it could explain in part his fierce self-criticism, and a clear sense of longing pervading his music, especially as he grew older, which we shall discuss in the following chapter. As we have seen, memory plays a large role in Kurtág’s music, and it is in this space between memory, reality, and dream that his music exists. To connect with the next chapter, I offer the following passage by Metzger:

Forever caught in paradoxes, the nostalgic wants to close the gap [between past and present] but at the same time he or she realizes that it must remain open. That gap is the space of nostalgia, without which the sensation could never exist. It must always have a far-away point at which to peer and an unsettled present from which to do so. Above all, nostalgia exists as a longing, and, with its object forever unattainable, it becomes in many ways a longing for a longing, a feeling that feeds upon its own desire.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Willson. *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, 13.

²⁰⁰ Metzger, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music*, 22.

CHAPTER IV
IN THE MANNER OF THE AGING KURTÁG

“With regard to farewell, my first memory is how I learned of my mother’s death.”²⁰¹

Although Kurtág’s habit of dedicating pieces to friends and contemporaries can be found in different periods of his career, Johnson observes that the frequency of these dedications increases throughout *Játékok*. While almost all explicit references in the first volume are to major composers, from whom Kurtág borrows well know material, gestures, or key elements, after Volume VI the average musician will recognize only a few of the many Hungarian names mentioned in different contexts,²⁰² and probably would not be able to identify at all the dedicatees of such pieces as *A Flower for Nuria*, *Christmas Greeting for Heini*, *Birthday Elegy for Judit*, or *In memoriam Dr. György Nádor*, all from the sixth volume. The references become more personal, obscuring the meaning for most interpreters, who are unable to identify not only the names inhabiting the pages of *Games*, but also how the music may relate to them.²⁰³ In the midst of a fragmented culture, in which artists no longer belong to ‘schools’ or ‘movements’, Kurtág’s develops an increasing overlap between his art and his private life. For Johnson, “The result of Kurtág’s engaging us with his own personal world of experience and relationships is to position himself and his music within an alternate field of

²⁰¹ Varga, *György Kurtág*, 52.

²⁰² Johnson, “Playing Games,” 24.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

reference to the purely linear historical.”²⁰⁴ However, as the composer and his contemporaries are aging it is striking to observe the peculiar direction that the collection takes, with an increasing number of pieces referring specifically to loss. To Johnson, “The very fact that Kurtág has chosen this ‘compositional sketchbook’ of ‘children’s pieces’ as the initial creative forum for his grief at the loss of a dear friend is extremely telling.”²⁰⁵ In fact, Varga had already observed in an interview with the composer that the processional characteristic of several of Kurtág’s works, moving at slow pace, could be constructed as a funeral march.²⁰⁶ Thus, having in mind the beginnings of *Játékok* as a collection for children, full of inventiveness and fine humor, this transformation is for me one of its most fascinating aspects, still deserving a more extensive study. The list of pieces included in the present discussion strives to bring more light to this aspect of *Játékok*, but is not meant to be definitive. The examples appearing in this chapter are just a selection in order to achieve a better understanding of the composer’s late style, though it is impossible to discuss all its nuances and manifestations within the limits of this document.

A very early instance of this inscrutable private world of loss is the inclusion of the motto *Flowers we are, Frail Flowers* as the headline for the first page of Volume I (Example 22), a fragment of text from *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza, Op. 7* reoccurring as a title or prosodic-rhythmic musical motif throughout *Játékok*.²⁰⁷ The motto is reworked in page 3B

²⁰⁴ Johnson, 31-2.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 29

²⁰⁶ Varga, *György Kurtág*, 64-5.

²⁰⁷ Willson, *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza, Op. 7*, 2.

of the same volume, which, according to Grmela, was originally written in a piano booklet for his wife. “The movement is based on five tones and these are translations of a telephone number into pitches in the diatonic scale. This telephone number was told to Kurtág in a message about the death of his friend.”²⁰⁸ This opening gesture is extremely telling for a collection that was supposedly meant for children. The same is true for the first explicit allusion to loss in the inscription ‘*in memoriam*’ to Magda Kardos at the top of page IB. Once the reader knows that she was Kurtág’s piano teacher during his years in Timisoara, in Western Romania, entrusting the young Kurtág to coach her younger pupils, such inscription has a symbolic connotation. In short, the appearance of this posthumous dedication right above the title *Játékok* already foreshadows the direction the collection would take many years later.

Example 22:

The musical notation consists of a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody is composed of five distinct pitches: G4, F4, E4, D4, and C4. The notes are: G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter), followed by a whole rest. The lyrics are written below the staff in three columns: Hungarian, German, and English.

Vi - rág,	vi - rág	az	em -	ber.
Blu - men	die Men - schen,	nur	Blu -	men.
Flow - ers	we are,	frail	flow -	ers.

²⁰⁸ Grmela “Recall and Repetition in Some Works by Kurtág,” 373.

The secretive quality of the motto *Flowers we are, frail flowers*, with its poetic allusion to the fragility of human existence, is revisited four times in Volume I, with the last one closing the volume, as follows:

Flowers We Are, Frail Flowers... (1a) – Vol. I, Page 3A.

Flowers We Are, Frail Flowers... (1b) – Vol. I, Page 3B,

... Flowers also the stars – Vol. I, Page 3B.

... and once more: Flowers We Are – Vol. I, Page 25B.

The second volume is also dedicated ‘*in memoriam*’ to Magda Kardos. Despite the fact the *Flowers* motto is absent, two other pieces are related to the present discussion: *Consolation - In Remembrance of Magda Szávai* (Vol. II, page 26) and *In memoriam Hermann Alice* (Vol. II, page 30). Both represent the first instances in the collection of an explicit musical reference to loss, though the respective ways in which it is expressed are quite different. While *Consolation* (Example 23) explores the painfulness inherent to the accumulation of dissonant intervals, culminating in clusters, *In memoriam Hermann Alice* (Example 24) extensively explores the same texture found in *Flowers We Are, Frail Flowers... (1b)*. Harmony becomes a consequence of a single melody distributed in Weberian fashion between different registers, with its melancholic character resulting from the slow pace and blending of overtones through the use of pedal. In fact, Kurtág would express in poetic terms that for him “harmony is melody pressed like a flower.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁹ Varga, *György Kurtág*, 16.

EXAMPLE 23

Consolation

Szávai Magda emlékezete

Magda Szávai zum Gedächtnis In Remembrance of Magda Szávai

p
con Ped.

poco a poco cresc.

f
Ped. Ped.

rinf. *sonore, dolce*
Ped.

pp (eco)

EXAMPLE 24

In memoriam Hermann Alice

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system is marked 'Lento' and 'p, dolce', and includes the instruction 'con Ped.' below the bass staff. The notation consists of two staves, treble and bass clef. The melody in the treble staff features a series of notes: E4, Bb4, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4. The bass staff provides accompaniment with notes: Bb3, Bb3, Bb3, Bb3, Bb3, Bb3, Bb3. Large, hand-drawn loops connect the notes between the two staves, illustrating the harmonic structure. The second system continues the piece with similar notation, showing further melodic and harmonic development.

The third volume seems again to avoid direct references. Instead, it offers allusions to this world of sorrow and sadness through three more pieces: *Elegy for the left hand* (Vol. II, Page 15), *(sorrowful tune)* (Vol. II, Page 17) and *Hommage a Schubert - Consolation to Sarah* (Vol. II, Page 26). While it is clear that *Elegy* focus on a texture fitting the left hand, it is more difficult to pinpoint any allusion to personal events, though they may exist. In *(sorrowful tune)* the texture is very close to *Consolation - In Remembrance of Magda Szávai* from Vol. II, with its exploration of the tension caused by certain cluster formations.

EXAMPLE 25

Consolation for Sarah

Hommage à Schubert

a)

tenuto-legato

(legato con Ped.)

quasi pizz.

(1/2 Ped.)

più dolce

(Ped. ord.)

This is also the case of *Hommage a Schubert* (Example 25 above, Vol. III, p. 26) whose connection to Kurtág's personal life can only be guessed. The composer has declared in an interview that Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* has been his ideal of musical beauty since childhood²¹⁰ after listening to the work on radio when he was twelve years old. His interest in the symphony led his parents to present him with the piano reduction of the work, which was a decisive moment in his life.²¹¹ Thus, having in mind that some years later the composer lost his mother, herself an amateur pianist, may conjure the association that for him Schubert's music has kept since then an intense and nostalgic sense of familiar comfort,

²¹⁰ Varga, György Kurtág, 16.

²¹¹ Ibid., 11.

gaining even more significance after this premature loss. Furthermore, the use of the word “consolation” above the title denotes comforting a person after a loss or disappointment. Gouveia has pointed out the interesting connection of its homophonic texture with *Der Tod und das Mädchen* (English: Death and the Maiden), one of Schubert’s most famous *Lieder*, in which the at the same time terrorizing and comforting aspects of death are central themes.

In *Der Tod und das Mädchen* (Example 26), based on a poem by Mathias Claudius, there are two characters depicted, whose characteristics need to be conveyed by the same singer. The first one is the distressed maiden, running away from death.

The Maiden:

Oh! leave me! Prithee, leave me! thou grisly man of bone!

For life is sweet, is pleasant.

Go! leave me now alone!

Go! leave me now alone!

While the young maiden is terrorized, supplicating to stay alive, death enters, offering consolation:

Death:

Give me thy hand, oh! maiden fair to see,

For I'm a friend, hath ne'er distress'd thee.

Take courage now, and very soon

Within mine arms shalt softly rest thee!

Der Tod und das Mädchen.

Claudius.

Op. 7. N^o 3.

73. *Mäßig.* (♩ = 54.) *pp*

The piano introduction consists of two staves. The right hand plays a series of chords in a descending sequence, while the left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The tempo is marked 'Mäßig' (moderate) with a quarter note equal to 54 beats per minute. The dynamic is 'pp' (pianissimo).

Etwas geschwinder.
(Das Mädchen.)

Vor-ü - ber, ach, vor-ü - ber! geh, wil - der Kno - chen-mann! Ich

The vocal line begins with a melodic phrase in the treble clef. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the left hand and chords in the right hand. The dynamic is 'p' (piano) and includes a 'cresc.' (crescendo) marking.

bin noch jung, geh, Lie - ber! und rüh - re mich nicht an, und

The vocal line continues with a similar melodic pattern. The piano accompaniment maintains the eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand and chords in the right hand.

Das erste Zeitmaß.
(Der Tod.)

rühre mich nicht an. Gib dei - ne Hand, du schön und zart Ge - bild! bin

The vocal line has a more somber and slower quality. The piano accompaniment is more sparse, with a 'dim.' (diminuendo) marking and a 'pp' (pianissimo) dynamic.

Freund und komme nicht zu stra - fen. Sei gutes Muts! ich bin nicht wild, sollst sanft in

The vocal line continues with a steady melodic line. The piano accompaniment consists of a consistent eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand and chords in the right hand.

meinen Ar - men schla - fen!

The vocal line concludes with a final melodic phrase. The piano accompaniment features a more complex chordal texture in the right hand, with the left hand continuing the eighth-note accompaniment.

Both piano parts share the same funeral-like rhythm. The harmonic voices move in the same register with subtlety within a somewhat static frame, the most remarkable feature being the prolongation of the treble line. The significance of this chordal texture is confirmed by the fact that it was used as the main material for Schubert's homonymous string quartet, in which the vocal line is omitted. Gouveia also commented that in Kurtág's miniature the opening bars correspond to the maiden, while the entrance of the theme by the left hand in the very low register ((Example 27) represents death.

EXAMPLE 27

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece, labeled 'EXAMPLE 27'. It consists of two staves: a treble staff and a bass staff. The treble staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. It contains a series of chords, with the first chord being a triad of F#, A, and C. The bass staff begins with a bass clef and contains a melody of quarter notes: F#, G, A, B, C, D, E, F#. The score includes the instruction 'più dolce (Ped. ord.)' below the bass staff. A box is drawn around the bass staff, highlighting the low register melody.

While the fourth volume (for four-hands) does not seem to have included any piece in this category, Volume V, published in 1997, becomes an outburst of this facet of Kurtág's music. The much longer list below makes this aspect evident:

Virág a Virág ... – Vol. V, Page 6

Double Consolation (for Janka Szendrei and myself) - Vol. V, Page 12

Flowers We Are ... (in memorian Árpád Illés) – Vol. V, Page 13

Les Adieux – Vol. V, Page 13

A Flower for Gabriella Garzo – Vol. V, Page 18

Bells for Margit Mándy – Vol. V, Page 21

Bell-fanfare for Sándor Veress – Vol. V, Page 22

Grassblades in memory of Klára Martyn – Vol. V, Page 23

Like the flowers of the field (In memorian Ligeti Llona) - Vol. V, Page 24

Farewell to Pál Kadosa - Vol. V, Page 25

In memorian György Kosa - Vol. V, Page 27

(The very last conversation with László Dörnyei) - Vol. V, Page 28

Organs and bells in memory of Doctor László Dobszay- Vol. V, Page 29

In memorian Erna Czövek - Vol. V, Page 30

Guillaume Apollinaire: L'adieu - Vol. V, Page 31

Farewell, S.W. - Vol. V, Page 42

3 in memorian - Vol. V, Page 43

As the composer gets older, the music becomes darker, exposing a recurrent feeling of loss through his many pieces treated as *in memoriam*, consolations or farewells, as well as the inclusion of other versions of the *Flowers* motto. In this present discussion, an interesting comparison can be constructed between this lamenting language, belonging to Kurtág's mature years, and the late works of his compatriot Franz Liszt, such as *Ossa arida* (1879), for mixed choir and organ, and the well known piano pieces *Nuages gris* (1881), *Bagatelle sans tonalité* (1885), as well as the memorial music of the less played *Seven Historical Hungarian Portraits* (1885). Furthermore, it is important to remember that the institution where Kurtág did his studies and spent most of his professional years bears Liszt's name. An emblematic example of this relationship, and considered as the starting point for this comparative analysis, is Kurtág's *Kondor Rock (in the manner of the aging Liszt)*, (Example 28, Vol. 5, p. 8), which was not included in the above list for the reason that it pays homage to a public figure. Written in 1979, when the composer was only 43 years old, its title clearly demonstrates his fascination for Liszt's late style.

EXAMPLE 28

Kondor-kő (a késői Liszt modorában)

Kondor-Stein (im Manier des späten Liszt)

Kondor Rock (in the manner of the aging Liszt)

Pesante, molto semplice

First system of the musical score. It consists of three staves: a treble clef staff, a bass clef staff, and a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The first measure is marked with a circled '2' and a forte 'f' dynamic. The second measure has a circled '3'. The third measure has a circled '2'. There are accents (^) over several notes. A 'poco' dynamic marking is present in the second measure of the grand staff.

Second system of the musical score. It consists of three staves. The first measure is marked with a circled '2'. The first measure of the grand staff has a 'molto' dynamic marking. The second measure of the grand staff has a 'più f' dynamic marking. The third measure of the grand staff has a 'poco' dynamic marking. The fourth measure has a 'Parlando' marking. The fifth measure has a 'poco' dynamic marking. The sixth measure has a 'sf' dynamic marking. There are accents (^) and slurs over various notes.

Third system of the musical score. It consists of three staves. The first measure has a 'pp' dynamic marking. The second measure has a 'ppp' dynamic marking. The third measure has a 'rinf. molto' dynamic marking. The fourth measure has a 'pp' dynamic marking. The fifth measure has a 'ppp' dynamic marking. The sixth measure has a 'ppp' dynamic marking. There are accents (^) and slurs over various notes. A 'con Ped.' marking is at the bottom.

1979. V. 17.

A very possible *objet volé* is the technique of piling-up 3rds in stacks, which is reminiscent of Liszt's pioneer building of new chords found in *Ossa arida* (Example 29), whose texture was described by Alan Walker as strikingly original for its time.²¹²

²¹² Alan Walker, et al. "Liszt, Franz." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed July 28, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/48265pg25>.

EXAMPLE 29

2 (94)

Ossa arida

für Männerchor und Orgel zu 4 Händen (mit Pedal).

Franz Liszt.
(Komponiert 1879.)

Chorus virorum.
Tenores et Bassi
unisoni.

Männerchor.
Tenöre, Bässe
einstimmig.

Chœur d'hommes.
Tenors, Basses
à l'unisson.

Primo.

Orgel.

Secundo.

Pedale.

Lento.

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As we have seen, instead of paying tribute to historical figures, like Liszt's funeral marches from *Seven Historical Hungarian Portraits*, Kurtág's later memorial music shifts towards his personal circle, due mainly to the deaths of family members, close acquaintances, and contemporaries. Nevertheless, the key musical elements observed in Kurtág's portrayal of Liszt's late period would find their way, consciously or not, into his own music. The first example illustrating this aspect is the opening of *Farewell to Pál Kadosa* (Example 30, Vol. 5, p. 25), which also contains similar blocks of thirds juxtaposed, though the pitch structure is different. Due to the dynamic in *ff*, Kurtág's emotional reaction to the loss of his piano teacher could be described rather as a shock:

EXAMPLE 30

Búcsú Kadosa Páltól

Abschied von Pál Kadosa

Farewell to Pál Kadosa

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'Farewell to Pál Kadosa'. It consists of two staves, treble and bass clef, with a grand staff bracket on the left. The score is divided into four measures. The first measure features a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic with a dense cluster of notes. The second measure is marked piano-piano (*pp*) and contains a single note. The third measure returns to fortissimo (*ff*) with another dense cluster. The fourth measure is marked piano-piano (*pp*) and contains a single note. A dashed line connects the notes in the first and third measures, and another dashed line connects the notes in the second and fourth measures. The text 'con ped.' is written below the first measure.

Similarly, Volume VI keeps an elegiac tone in many of its pieces, as we can see below:

A Flower for Nuria - Vol. VI, Page 13

Marina Tsvetayeva: It's time (In memoriam Triznya Mátyás) - Vol. VI, Page 24

In memoriam Pál Járdányi - Vol. VI, Page 25

Les Adieux (in Janáček's Manner) – Vol. VI, Page 28

In memoriam Tibor Szeszler - Vol. VI, Page 32

Birthday elegy for Judit – for the second finger of her left hand – Vol. VI, Page 33

A Quiet Farewell to Endre Székely– Vol. VI, Page 36

To Stefánia Mándy (In memoriam Béla Tábor) – Vol. VI, Page 37

In memoriam Lajos Vass - Vol. VI, Page 38

Lendvai Ernő in memoriam - Vol. VI, Page 42

One More Word to Ernő Lendvai- Vol. VI, Page 43

In memoriam Dr. György Nádor - Vol. VI, Page 46

In memoriam András Mihály - Vol. VI, Page 50

The same kind of thirds juxtaposed will also become the basic element of grief in *In memoriam András Mihály*, (Example 31, Vol. VI, P. 50). The piece was written in 1993 after the death of cellist, teacher and composer András Mihály, an influential name in Hungarian music and one of the most important figures in Kurtág's life.

EXAMPLE 31

Mihály András emlékére

In memoriam András Mihály

♩ = 30 - 20

pp

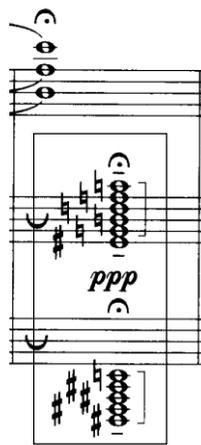
con Ped. $\left[\frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{4} \text{ ped.} \right]$ al fine

The same pitch structure encountered in *Ossa Arida* is the foundation of Kurtág's initial chord (Example 32).

EXAMPLE 32:

It is striking to realize that by the end of the piece the composer uses almost the same exact formation of chords found in *Kondor Rock*, but in this case not occurring simultaneously (Example 33a and 33b).

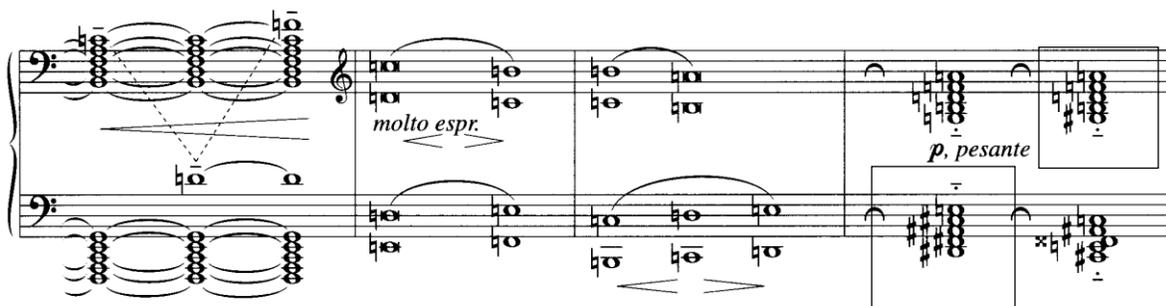
EXAMPLE 33a



The image shows a musical score for 'Kondor Rock'. It features a grand staff with two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and the lower staff is in bass clef. The music consists of dense, complex chords. A dynamic marking of *ppp* is present in the center of the score. The notation includes various accidentals and articulation marks.

Kondor Rock

EXAMPLE 33b



The image shows a musical score for 'In memoriam András Mihály'. It features a grand staff with two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and the lower staff is in bass clef. The music consists of dense, complex chords. Dynamics include *molto espr.* and *p, pesante*. The notation includes various accidentals and articulation marks.

In memoriam András Mihály

A possible explanation to all these reappearances can be found in Grmela, who stated that is common for Kurtág to allude to earlier pieces of his own. “He has said that when he writes a musical passage that he is happy with, he accepts it as a gift and incorporates it into his language as one of his musical objects and feels free to distribute it throughout his works,” writes Grmela.²¹³

Volume VII, however, contains a reduced number of pieces in this category:

Szunyogh István in memoriam - Vol. VII, Page 9

In memoriam Edson Denisov - Vol. VI, Page 20

In memoriam Llona Rozsnyai - Vol. VII, Page 32

In memoriam Attila Bozay - Vol. VII, Page 40

Virág as ember... - Vol. VII, Page 41

Johan van der Keuken in memoriam - Vol. VII, Page 41

A variation of the same chord found in *Farewell to Pál Kadosa* and *In memorian András Mihály* also appears in the opening of *In memorian Edison Denisov*, (Example 34, Vol.7, 20), dedicated to one of the most important leaders of the post-Shostakovich generation in Soviet Russia. The sequence of thirds starts with the same notes found in Liszt’s *Ossa arida*, though in this case it might be just a coincidence. In this context the music bears a sense of anguished violence very distinct from the previous two examples.

²¹³ Grmela “Recall and Repetition in Some Works by Kurtág,” 372.

EXAMPLE 35

Tears

Quasi senza tempo

Pianino

pppp

con 1/4 ped
(1/2)

poco espr.

This piece is characterized by a different type of chordal texture, usually exploring the expressiveness of major and minor 2nds, resulting from the expansion of the harmonic parts through mostly chromatic motion. The soft dynamics are enhanced by the use of a pianino, so the dissonant intervals have a subtler effect.

A very similar material appears as the middle section of the aforementioned *In memoriam Edison Denisov* (Example 36, Vol., as if it is portraying a moment of disconsolation in the midst of the tumultuous outer sections:

EXAMPLE 36

Andante giusto, ben tenuto

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system has a treble staff with dynamics *sub. ppp, lontano*, *sub. mp*, and *ppp*, and a bass staff with dynamics *pp* and *ppp*. It includes performance instructions *8* and *[sempre con ped.]*. The second system has a treble staff with dynamics *pp pesante* and *pppp [словно с высоты]*, and a bass staff with dynamics *pp* and *ppp*. It includes a *8* instruction and a diamond-shaped symbol.

This type of texture can be traced back to the 1970s in such pieces as the already discussed *Consolation - In Remembrance of Magda Szávai* (Example 37, Vol. II, page 26), which in fact shares very similar features with *Tears*.

EXAMPLE 37

The image shows two systems of piano music. The first system consists of two staves. The upper staff has a treble clef and contains a series of notes with slurs and ties, starting with a dynamic marking of *p*. The lower staff has a bass clef and contains a few notes with slurs. Below the staves is the instruction *con Ped.*. The second system also consists of two staves. The upper staff has a treble clef and contains a complex melodic line with many slurs and ties, marked with a dynamic of *poco a poco cresc.*. A dashed line is drawn above this staff, following the contour of the notes. The lower staff has a bass clef and contains a few notes with slurs.

Another similar crying figure also makes its appearance in *Farewell to Pal Kadosa* (Example 38, Vol. 5, p.25), from 1983. Through an examination of *In memoriam Edison Denisov* we can observe the intervallic expansion as a consequence of the tension created by the interval of minor second.

EXAMPLE 38

The image shows two systems of piano music. The first system consists of two staves. The upper staff has a treble clef and contains a series of notes with slurs and ties, marked with a dynamic of *f*. The lower staff has a bass clef and contains a few notes with slurs. Below the staves are dynamic markings of *p* and *pp*. A box highlights a section of the upper staff marked with a dynamic of *p, dolce, semplice*. The second system also consists of two staves. The upper staff has a treble clef and contains a complex melodic line with many slurs and ties, marked with a dynamic of *poco*. A dashed line is drawn above this staff, following the contour of the notes. The lower staff has a bass clef and contains a few notes with slurs.

Although each of them represents an individual character, it is important to notice that in more than one instance this sobbing figure follows the blocks of stacked thirds, therefore representing different sides of the composer's same world of suffering.

As we have seen, Kurtág's memorial pieces, despite being tributes, seem to deal above all with the feeling of loss. They are related, as Metzger explains, to a sort of longing. "Nostalgia attempts to fill that loss by animating the past, making it appear [...] that it has returned and that one can re-experience it. [...] In nostalgic evocations, the past ultimately recedes and falls apart, leaving the reminiscing figure disconsolate in the present."²¹⁴ In relation to this, Varga has observed that a basic feature of Kurtág's personality has been "his need to establish human relationships that last a lifetime - even after the death of a friend. They continue to influence his thinking, his work as a composer, and his private life, even posthumously."²¹⁵ To what degree these nostalgic evocations are a genuine celebration of life beyond just a means of fueling the composer's creative process, it is an open question. Kurtág himself, who refers to Ligeti's death in the following terms, provides a vivid example of this characteristic:

Obituary, speech of mourning? For me he's more alive than ever. For months my small study in St-André has been filled with his compositions, writings, and speeches, with essays, articles, and commemorative texts about him. Again and again I read the scores and listen to all recordings I can get on my hands. ²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Metzger, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music*, 118.

²¹⁵ Varga, *György Kurtág*, 1.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

Volume VIII, for two pianos or four hands, the last one published so far, includes seven more pieces somewhat related to loss. Furthermore, four of them deal with the motto *Flowers we are*, which, at least at the present moment, opens and closes the entire collection.

Flowers we are... (embracing sounds) - Vol. VIII, Page 1

A Quiet Farewell to Endre Székely - Vol. VIII, Page 11

Flowers we are... - for Miyako - Vol. VIII, Page 16

Flowers we are... (alio modo) - for Miyako - Vol. VIII, Page 16

In memoriam Gyorgy Sebok - Vol. VIII, Page 18

Flowers we are... (for piano, upright piano, and percussion)... - Vol. VIII, Page 22

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that *Játékok* allows a wide variety of approaches from different angles. The first volumes of the collection, despite their exploration of avant-garde elements, are still rooted on the rich Hungarian pedagogical tradition, and Chapter 2.2 discussed the main influences and how Kurtág's work dialogue with them. Nevertheless, as it is the case with Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*, the aspect that fascinates me most is the musical content itself, and how Kurtág applies the concept of games with varied results. For instance, they can be analyzed as performative games, in which 'playing' is interpreted as the more obvious act of performing the pieces, but also related to the idea of 'playfulness', therefore treating the piano almost as a toy, exploring all possibilities of movement. This is especially true in the first three volumes, in which the gestural aspect of piano playing plays an important role. Another even larger group is represented by those pieces treated as compositional and/or cultural games. Here, the composer is 'playing' with tradition, alluding to other composers, artists and historical practices, and by consequence also relocating the cultural meaning embedded in those borrowings. Born in Central Europe, Kurtág is able to mix references coming both from West and East with ease, from the French artist Marcel Duchamp to the Soviet poet Marina Tsvetaeva. Following this classification, a third category should be added: the private games, in which people, colleagues and facts from the composer's personal life stimulate his creative process, becoming an increasingly important part of the set after Volume V. Many connections are not obvious, which are part of the

secretiveness of his personal messages. Chapter 4 brings some interesting insights into his late period, yet I recognize that the scope of this research did not allow me to delve as deeply as I wished into more theoretical pursuits, such as an analysis of the variations of the chord structure found in *In the Manner of the Aging Liszt*, which should be expanded in the future.

In this light, the first two groups are more likely to intersect, especially through Kurtág's use of the concept of *objet trouvé*. *A piece such as Perpetuum mobile (objet trouvé)*, for instance, *is at the same time playing a cultural game and demanding the performer to engage his/her whole body with the music. Nonetheless, it was possible to observe that pieces categorized as private games can also use techniques found in the second category, a characteristic exemplified through the analysis of Kondor Rock: In the Manner of the Aging Liszt, whose objet volé (stolen object) would find its way in the private music of In memoriam András Mihály, a work belonging to the third group.*

In its heterodoxy, the collection reflects the fragmentation of the cultural world after World War II, no longer organized in movements or schools sharing similar aesthetic beliefs and practices. Kurtág started to compose *Games* just in 1973, when he was 47 years old, therefore also witnessing the slow dissolution of the communist bloc in the following decade. This observation reveals the composer's sensitivity and openness, as well as his courage and persistence to start from scratch in a moment of historical and aesthetic transition, in which many other composers would be just holding on to their old beliefs. In that perspective, the flexibility of his performative games, which invite the performer to be an active part of the process in the same way as the theatrical productions of the Kassák House Studio, may be interpreted as a subtle political critique of the *status quo*. Kurtág's musical reinterpretation

of the Duchampian concept of *objet trouvé* (*found object*) also resonates with such a view, elevating the importance of the reader, or signifier, in shaping the meaning of the creative work. As Hungary's borders become progressively open to the Western world, however, Kurtág's role as a subversive guru is dissolved, and the composer seeks for new ground by turning to his private world. However, Kurtág's complex character seems to escape standard categorizations, as his practices of expressing the feelings aroused by loss and death with such emotional commitment are quite unique if compared with other artists from the same period. I also believe that the analysis of what I have defined as his "music of loss" would benefit a great deal from psychological investigations, since the understanding of his music is inseparable from his personal life.

My personal experience studying and performing selections from *Játékok* in recitals revealed that these little fragments seem to appear at their best when in dialogue with other composers, as Kurtág does by alternating his *Games* with his own transcriptions of works by J. S. Bach. This idea has also been explored by other interpreters, such as the fascinating *Kurtág's Ghosts* by Marino Formenti, in which the Italian pianist juxtaposes Kurtág's music with the respective composers and works he is alluding to in his pieces. Thus, while I was planning a program in which I was going to perform a selection from Kurtág's *Games* after Debussy's first book of *Preludes*, I attempted a similar idea, which has its origins in the obvious connection between Debussy's *La fille aux cheveux de lin* and Kurtág's *La fille aux cheveux de lin - enragée*, briefly discussed in Chapter 3. From this sparkle, I started to find fascinating connections between the other pieces, creating a program in which each prelude

by Debussy is followed by one of Kurtág's *Games*.²¹⁷ Each piece is linked to the next in different ways, such as through tonal relationships, metric, character, mood, texture, etc, complementing each other and resulting in a fluid line. Because Kurtág's aphoristic style makes it troublesome to perform too many pieces in a row, it gains in scope through the support of Debussy's music. At the same time, Kurtág's presence makes possible to hear Debussy's masterworks with invigorating freshness.

In short, the nature of Kurtág's style demands not just musicality, technique and performative presence, but also a deep understanding of the cultural symbols and conceptualizations of art that occurred during the twentieth-century. The composer, fully aware of the coexistence of different voices from his time and past, seems open to everything, achieving his most expressive moments through the tension resulting from the juxtaposition of historical layers. Thus, this study aims above all to demonstrate the importance of Kurtág's *Games* for piano literature, and expand our understanding of the work. I hope this research may help to offset the growing disconnect between pianists and the music of our recent times, serving as an aid for those interpreters and pedagogues facing the challenges and demands of approaching new repertoire for the piano.

²¹⁷ The full program order of my Debussy- Kurtág recital is included in the Appendix.

APPENDIX

Recital Program - Sample

Debussy ... Danseuses de Delphes

Kurtág ... Harang-fanfar Veress Sandornak (Bell-fanfare for Sandor Veress)

Debussy ... Voiles

Kurtág ... Csomók (Knots)

Debussy ... Le vent dans la plaine

Kurtág ... A kis zivatar (The Little Squall)

Debussy ... Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir

Kurtág ... Fugitive thoughts about the Alberti bass

Debussy ... Les collines d'Anacapri

Kurtág ... Capriccioso - Luminoso

Debussy ... Des pas sur la neige

Kurtág ... Aus der Ferne II (Voice in the Distance II) (Hommage a Alfred Schlee 85)

Debussy ... Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest

Kurtág ... Antiphone in f-sharp

Debussy ... La fille aux cheveux de lin

Kurtág ... A megvadult lenhaju lany (La fille aux cheveux de lin - enragee)

Debussy ... La serenade interrompue

Kurtág ... Marina Tsvetayeva: It's Time

Debussy ... La cathedrale engloutie

Kurtág ... Hommage à Farkas Ferenc (2) (Scraps of a colinda melody-faintly recollected)

Debussy ... La danse de Puck

Kurtág ... Hempergos (Tumble-bunny)

Debussy ... Minstrels

Kurtág ... Harmonica (Hommage à Borsody László)

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