

## **The Fruitful Tension between Inspiration and Design in György Kurtág's *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* op. 7 (1963–68)**

*by Rachel Beckles Willson*

In this study I offer some introductory assessments of Kurtág's working method. They are based on a small part of a vast collection of charismatic yet disorganised sketches for his first vocal work, which is an intensely dramatic forty-minute cycle for soprano and piano. I present my evidence in the context of Kurtág's own self-declared relationship with composition, which is of such curiosity that it deserves to be drawn into the picture.

Kurtág's description of himself presents something of a paradox in the context of his works. His most recently published interview includes the statements "I am a dilettante. I can only compose when the work builds itself".<sup>1</sup> A rather self-deprecatory comment, but comprehensible, perhaps, as a composer's intuitive standpoint. Stravinsky's description of a composer at work was not dissimilar when he said that the composer "selects, he combines, and he is not in the least aware at what point meanings of a different sort and significance grow into his work".<sup>2</sup>

Stravinsky himself went on to say: "All [the composer] knows or cares about is his apprehension of the contour of the form, for form is everything".<sup>3</sup> Kurtág makes no such concession. Instead, he compares the production of works with the birth of an infant, saying "the child decides when it wants to be born, not its mother".<sup>4</sup> Kurtág's scores, however, comprise webs of intricate structural interconnections.

*The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* in particular is a firmly crafted cycle. The texts are Kurtág's own assembly of fragments from the writings of Bornemisza, a sixteenth-century Protestant preacher. Kurtág's organisation of texts provides a frame for a relatively traditional large-scale musical form. The twenty-four movements are set into four large parts, entitled "Confession", "Sin", "Death" and "Spring". They lay out a dramatic vista. Parts I to III chart a descent, emphasising the weakness of man, his fundamental evil, and his frailty. Part IV, however, bursts into an inspiring ascent: the metaphor of renewing Spring evokes a rekindling of belief in redemption. One textual frag-

ment which appears more than once within the cycle sums up the whole in three words: “Virág az Ember”. Literally, “Flower the Man”. Man withers and dies, yet may rise to flourish again.

Careful construction is evident on several levels in the score and in manuscripts. Kurtág’s meticulous beaming of notes in particular groups in the score is always of significance for the performer, and offers a good starting point for analysis. I have used Allen Forte’s pitch class set terminology in order to name these cells, and as a useful means of establishing similarities and differences between them.

Movement 2 of Part II (II/2) is of a type which lends itself to this approach.

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**Capriccioso**

*p leggiero*

Az	el -	me	sza -	bad	ál -	lat,	ő -	tet	sem
Der	Geist	ist	frei -	es	Wild -	tier,	das	nicht	mit
The	mind	will	have	its	free -	dom,	nei -	ther	by

*p f*

*2do*

Example 1: György Kurtág, *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* for voice and piano op. 7 (1963–68), Part II, beginning of movement 2. © 1973 by Editio Musica (Budapest) and Universal Edition A.G. (Vienna).

It is typical within the cycle of textures which permute a chain of one or two simple cells, placing them like objects in a series of changing registers, transpositions and inversions. In the piano introduction, the basic cell may be taken as interval class 2. The pairs of notes are differentiated from one another in articulation and dynamic level. The vocal entry stimulates an additive process:

the cells are chained into the larger set of (0,2,5,7), and its subset (0,2,5).<sup>5</sup> The text as provided in the score, “The mind will have its freedom, neither by chaining nor tethering, none can entrammel it”, is captured in the flighty gestures and pitch movement.

Sketches for this movement demonstrate Kurtág’s early building work. The first sketch shows him noting ic 2s, distributed between the pianist’s two hands (*Example 2*).<sup>6</sup>



*Example 2:* György Kurtág, *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* for voice and piano op. 7 (1963–68), sketch of Part II, movement 2 (György Kurtág Collection).

The sense of jumpiness with which Kurtág was experimenting is clear from the angles of the beam on this sketch. The parts of the beam connecting the ic 2s were evidently added later. In the finished score, Kurtág removed the links joining the pairs once again.

Other sketches of the period offer quite a different insight into the movement’s birth. Before beginning opus 7, Kurtág was working on a set of pieces for guitar entitled *Marcheta*, which he never finished. The third of these resembles opus 7’s II/2 (*Example 3*).<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, in a series of notes Kurtág wrote to himself about plans for several movements, he makes reference to the guitar.<sup>8</sup> While concrete manipulation of material is evident from the page, subconscious maturing and recycling of materials also clearly plays a part.



Example 3: György Kurtág, *Marcheta* for guitar (ca. 1963), sketch for No. 3 (György Kurtág Collection).

Kurtág wrote extensive notes about the construction of opus 7, Parts I to IV: he spent time organising the work as a whole. Within these is a revealing reference to “Virág az Ember”. In Part III, “Death”, movement 3’s setting of the fragment introduces a dyad of G sharp to E (*Example 4*):

3

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

ppp

Example 4: György Kurtág, *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* for voice and piano op. 7 (1963–68), Part III, beginning of movement 3. © 1973 by Editio Musica (Budapest) and Universal Edition A.G. (Vienna).

This motive functions within a web of acoustic connections which contribute to the cycle's coherence. The opening vocal entries of both Parts II and III, "Sin" and "Death", for example, consist of the motive in inversion, one octave lower (*Example 5*).

A bűn Die Sün Thy sin

de

Presto *pp*

A	ha	-	lál,	mint	egy	tór
Es	raffi		dich	der	Tod,	wie
For	Death		is	like	a	net

*Example 5: György Kurtág, The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza for voice and piano op. 7 (1963–68), Part III, beginning of movement 2, and Part II, beginning of the vocal line of movement 1.*

What is interesting is that Kurtág did not originally envisage it as being structurally significant. All recognisable traces of “Virág az Ember”, except the final *Reinschrift*, show that Kurtág’s original intention for this fragment lay ic 1 lower in pitch. The opening dyad was G – E flat, not G sharp – E.<sup>9</sup>

It was later on in the compositional process that Kurtág made the decision to transpose the fragment. One set of sketches illustrates his decision to trans-

Egért darabban 1. nagyobb  
 hangszámban két kézzel:  
 II (2) (3) kezd. gis-d  
 jelezés után font gis-d és:  
 c. belül. → #0 b0  
 virág?

*Example 6: György Kurtág, The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza for voice and piano op. 7 (1963–68), sketch in sketchbook, extract (György Kurtág Collection).*

pose it, and to position it as III/3, rather than III/1. It is at this stage that Kurtág worked on large-scale structure, making a note to “clarify connections of key in the whole piece”.<sup>10</sup> He refers to motion from III/2 to III/3 noting that the bass-line ending of movement 2 involves a step from G sharp to D. He then questions what should follow that ending, writing “after the ending, high G sharp?”<sup>11</sup> observing the following connection resulting between movements 2 and 3 (*Example 6*).

To a degree, connections did build themselves – Kurtág only helped them to do so. As a result of the fragment’s transposition, several words in Part III resonate particularly through their use of the dyad in that register. The dyad sets two references in the text to the “iron gate of death” in III/7, and the word “dream” in III/9. Kurtág himself may even have been unaware of certain resonances. In III/4, for example, there is a dramatic stage in the text at which point the spirit separates itself from the body, and pitches are gradually allowed to slip upwards beyond an insistently reiterating high water mark of A flat. A flat fulfils the same function as G sharp in this post-tonal language, yet had Kurtág been aware of the connection, he would surely have notated it as G sharp.

Opus 7 presents a rich conflict between Kurtág’s longing for a natural birth, and his recognition of the need to provide a framework for his new arrival. This tension lends the work a fearsome power. The sketches themselves are paradoxical: a chaotic, idealistic mass of wildly inconsequential notes, coupled with clear plans for format.

The format of opus 7 is markedly different from several of his later works, in which small-scale construction remains intricate but large-scale architectural design is of less consequence. Perhaps Kurtág’s statements about his work are best understood in the context of these. *Kafka-Fragmente* op. 24, for example, comprises a collection of forty fragments gathered together in a far looser assembly than opus 7. Kurtág even chose a surrogate mother to “give birth” to the piece: his friend and advisor András Wilhelm was responsible for ordering the fragments.<sup>12</sup> A step further, Kurtág’s *Játékok* (Plays and Games) for piano are published as sets of aphoristic pieces, the order of which is left to the discretion of the performer. In these works Kurtág seems to have given up wrestling with structure, relinquishing authority completely in the final stages. In doing this he embodies a new paradox: while composing he remains obsessively in control of tiny units, but he subsequently releases them to be set in order by another.

It is no wonder, then, that he has turned to such writers as Kafka, who celebrates paradox in tiny fragments: “As tightly as the hand holds the stone. It holds it so tight only to cast it as far off as it can. Yet even that distance the path will reach”, he writes.<sup>13</sup> The question of whether Kurtág’s decision to bury himself in these acutely pertinent fragments has dissolved his grappling with structural tension to the detriment of his later cycles, will, perhaps, warrant a later study.

- 1 “Az ember sohasem érkezik túl későn. Hans Heg beszélgetése Kurtág Györggyel”, in: *Muzsika* (February 1996), p. 12. My translation.
- 2 Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Expositions and Developments*, Berkeley 1981, pp.114–16.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 I am grateful to Eoin Coleman for pointing out to me that these numbers form a Fibonacci series, which may be regarded as self-generating, rather than following a subjective path of development.
- 6 Loose sheets Folio 18.
- 7 Sketchbook Folio 13.
- 8 Sketchbook Folio 19 “Mint a gitár II” and “III??? Scherzo? mint a Merrycate III ...?” *Cinque Merrycate* and *Marcheta* were versions of the same work. I am grateful to András Wilhelm for telling me this.
- 9 Sketchbook Folio 13 contains the earliest sketch (p. 24). This book is undated, but its content is indicative of the earliest phase of Kurtág’s work. Not only do several of the *Reinschriften* contain the fragment at the lower pitch, but the manuscript used by the singer Erika Sziklay in the work’s premiere and recording also contains this version on a loose leaf at the front of the score. It is labelled III/1. The main part of the score contains, however, the final version. I am grateful to Erika Sziklay for showing me this manuscript.
- 10 Third Sketchbook in Folio 1, pp. 12–15. My translation: “Egész darabban, hangnemi kapcsolatokat tisztázni”. The work in this sketchbook includes dates from June 10 to June 12, 1966.
- 11 “befejezés után, fönt gisz?”
- 12 “Komponisten-Portrait György Kurtág, entwickelt im Gespräch mit Ulrich Dibelius”, in: *Ligeti und Kurtág in Salzburg*, Programmbuch der Salzburger Festspiele, edited by Ulrich Dibelius, Salzburg/Zürich 1993, p. 94.
- 13 György Kurtág, *Kafka-Fragmente* op. 24, Editio Musica Budapest 1992. Translation Peter and Júlia Sherwood.