BARD COLLEGE CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC
PRESENTS

SIGNS GAMES & MESSAGES 2026

Bard

BARD COLLEGE CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC

Founded in 2005, the Bard College Conservatory of Music offers a unique five-year, double-degree program at the undergraduate level, integrating rigorous musical training with a liberal arts education. Graduate programs include vocal arts, conducting, instrumental performance, and Chinese music and culture, along with Advanced Performance Studies and Postgraduate Collaborative Piano Fellowships. The Conservatory's US-China Music Institute, formed in 2017, offers the only degree programs in Chinese instrument performance in the Western Hemisphere. The Bard Conservatory Orchestra has performed at Lincoln Center; toured internationally in China, Russia, Eastern Europe, and Cuba; and, in collaboration with the Bard Prison Initiative, presents annual performances at New York State prisons. The Conservatory enrolls more than 200 students from 27 countries and 35 states.

BARD COLLEGE CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC

Presents

SIGNS GAMES & MESSAGES 2026

SEASON SEVEN
A Kurtág Festival
Benjamin Hochman, Artistic Director

PROGRAM ONE
Kurtág and the Lieder Tradition
Wednesday, March 11 at 7 pm
Olin Hall

PROGRAM TWO
Abrahamsen's *Schnee*
Friday, March 27 at 7 pm
Conservatory Performance Space

PROGRAM THREE
Bach Inventions and Sinfonias
Saturday, March 28 at 1 pm
Conservatory Performance Space

SPECIAL PROGRAM
Movie Screening: *Kurtág Fragments*
Directed by Dénes Nagy
Saturday, March 28 at 3:30 pm
Jim Ottaway Jr. Film Center
Presented in collaboration with Brooklyn Public Library and The National Film Institute, Hungary

PROGRAM FOUR
Songs, Laments, Dances, Games
Saturday, March 28 at 7 pm
Chapel of the Holy Innocents

PROGRAM FIVE
Preconcert Lecture with Gergely Fazekas
"*I compose to seek the truth*": The Musical Universe of György Kurtág
Sunday, March 29 at 1:30 pm
Conservatory Performance Space

Kurtág, Mozart, and the Bach Family
Sunday, March 29 at 3 pm
Conservatory Performance Space

PROGRAM SIX
György Kurtág in Context: Bach, Bartók, and Kurtág
Saturday, April 4 at 4 pm
Dr. S. Stevan Dweck Cultural Center
Central Library, Brooklyn Public Library, New York City

Signs, Games & Messages is an annual festival celebrating the music and musical legacy of the great Hungarian composer György Kurtág (b. 1926) alongside works by those who shaped or were shaped by his artistry. It fosters a timeless, open-ended dialogue between composers, musicians, and styles, with Kurtág's music as the focal point.

This festival has been permanently endowed through the generous support of the László Z. Bitó and Olivia Carino Foundation.


György Kurtág

NOTE FROM THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Kurtág as Teacher
I first experienced György Kurtág's teaching in 1996, when I attended a master class that he taught at the Jerusalem Music Centre. Together with his wife, Márta, he worked with young musicians on his own music as well as music by Ludwig van Beethoven.

At the time, I was 16 and he was 70.

I remember him going over the first three notes of the Beethoven Cello Sonata, Op. 69, No. 3, for what seemed to me an eternity. I understood that he was searching intensely for something, striving to extract from the music an essential truth—or rather reveal it—for himself as well as for the young musicians. What, exactly, that essence might be was light years beyond my comprehension at 16, yet I could feel that this was far from nonsense. Although I couldn't understand the nuances, the quest itself made a profound impression on me.

In 2010, I heard Kurtág and Márta teach at Carnegie Hall. They worked in a master class setting with a few string quartets from the early stages of their careers. This time, Kurtág's work on the slow movement of the Beethoven String Quartet, Op. 59, No. 2, stuck with me. He approached this music with reverence, but vitality as well; he treated each note as part of a musical language. Elements like tone, color, or phrasing were never prioritized over the music itself.

In the fall of 2025, I played for Kurtág (Márta had passed away). It was the third time I had worked with him since 2021. We practiced several *Játékok* (*Games*)—his short piano pieces—as well as J. S. Bach and Beethoven.

I was 45, and he was 99.

We spent a long time on the coda of the tragic slow movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata, Op. 10, No. 3. I could feel that this piece was of the utmost importance to him. It could have been the first time he'd encountered the work or the thousandth time; the total commitment of his approach would have been the same.

The fact that he sometimes allowed me to play more than three notes at a time, that we could zoom in and out of the musical text together, meant a lot to me. It felt like a mutual dance—like searching, and sometimes even finding. All it took was the hint of a soured expression on his face for me to know that I had pained him by not doing justice to the music, by playing without even a semblance of genuine understanding.

At 99 still, his antennae are very sharp—so tuned that he picks up the slightest hint of wavering attention. There is something of the guru in him, but his quest is without artifice. He is still searching, and so are we.

Benjamin Hochman
December 2025

PROGRAM ONE

Kurtág and the Lieder Tradition

Wednesday, March 11 at 7 pm
Olin Hall

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

An die Leier, D. 737
Nachtviolen, D. 752
Die Sterne, D. 939
Wandrers Nachtlied II, D. 768
Benjamin Appl, baritone
Erika Switzer, piano

György Kurtág (b. 1926)

Four Schuster Songs (lyrics by Ulrike Schuster)
Die Rosen
Die Zeit
Ich weiß nicht
Physalis alkagengi
Benjamin Appl, baritone
Benjamin Hochman, piano

György Kurtág

Selections from *Játékok (Games)*
Thistle (Book 3)
Hommage à Schubert (Book 3)
Präludium und Choral (Book 5)
Márta ligaturája (Book 12)
Hommage à Berényi Ferenc 70 (Book 7)
Capriccioso – Luminoso (Book 5)
... Apple Blossom ... (Book 9)
Les Adieux (in Janáček's manner) (Book 6)
Ligatura dolce amara – amara - dolce (Book 11)
Benjamin Hochman, piano

Franz Schubert

Rondo in A Major, D. 951 (for piano four hands)
James Baillieu, piano
Benjamin Hochman, piano

INTERMISSION

György Kurtág

***Hölderlin-Gesänge*, Op. 35a**
An . . .
Im Walde (für Georg Kröll)
Gestalt und Geist
An Zimmern (für Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus)
Der Spaziergang (für Heinz Holliger)
Tübingen, Jänner (Robert Klein in Erinnerung)
Benjamin Appl, baritone
Demian Austin, trombone
Marcus Rojas, tuba

Robert Schumann (1810–56)

***Kerner-Lieder*, Op. 35**
Benjamin Appl, baritone
James Baillieu, piano

György and Márta Kurtág at the piano

PROGRAM TWO

Abrahamsen's *Schnee*

Friday, March 27 at 7 pm
Conservatory Performance Space

George Benjamin (b. 1960) — **Canon & Fugue (from *The Art of Fugue* by J. S. Bach)**
Liliana Szokol, flute
Dominik Kovács, Danika Dortch, French horn
Qijia Liu, Hadi Masood, Junyu Lin, violin
Chloe Slane, Katherine Chernyak, viola
Abigail Wolf, cello
Benjamin Hochman, conductor

György Kurtág (b. 1926) — **Selections from *Játékok (Games)***
(including from vols. 11–12)
Benjamin Hochman, piano

Hans Abrahamsen (b. 1952) — ***Schnee* (Snow): *Ten Canons for Nine Instruments***
Ryan MacEvoy McCullough,
Sophia Cornicello, piano
Elizabeth Chernyak, violin
Mason Haskett, viola
William Pilgrim, cello
Elizabeth Bennett, flute
Elizabeth Young, oboe
James McCourt, clarinet
Mike Jones, percussion
Benjamin Hochman, conductor

PROGRAM THREE

Bach Inventions and Sinfonias

Performed by students of the Bard College Conservatory and Preparatory Division
Saturday, March 28 at 1 pm
Conservatory Performance Space

J. S. Bach (1685–1750) The Complete Inventions and Sinfonias, BWV 772–801

Invention No. 1 in C Major	Alexandra Balog
Invention No. 2 in C Minor	Ivy Chen
Invention No. 3 in D Major	Congrui Zhu
Invention No. 4 in D Minor	Sophia Cornicello
Invention No. 5 in E-flat Major	Chelsea Yang
Invention No. 6 In E Major	Linus Ramakrishnan
Invention No. 7 in E Minor	Xinri Zhang
Invention No. 8 in F Major	Vika Hasselmark
Invention No. 9 in F Minor	Junhao Fu
Invention No. 10 in G Major	Nikita Tumanov
Invention No. 11 in G Minor	Marcos Castilla
Invention No. 12 in A Major	Juliette Benveniste
Invention No. 13 in A Minor	Fiona Kelly
Invention No. 14 in B-flat Major	Arlo Abeysekera
Invention No. 15 in B Minor	Wenjia Ma

INTERMISSION

Sinfonia No. 1 in C Major	Sophia Cornicello
Sinfonia No. 2 in C Minor	Sawyer Dahlen
Sinfonia No. 3 in D Major	Yujia Yang
Sinfonia No. 4 in D Minor	Augustus Lamm
Sinfonia No. 5 in E-flat Major	Hasti Safaei
Sinfonia No. 6 in E Major	Ivy Chen
Sinfonia No. 7 in E Minor	Chelsea Yang
Sinfonia No. 8 in F Major	Junhao Fu
Sinfonia No. 9 in F Minor	Nikita Tumanov
Sinfonia No. 10 in G Major	Xinri Zhang
Sinfonia No. 11 in G Minor	Juliette Benveniste
Sinfonia No. 12 in A Major	Wenjia Ma
Sinfonia No. 13 in A Minor	Oskar Baron
Sinfonia No. 14 in B-flat Major	Congrui Xhu
Sinfonia No. 15 in B Minor	Alexandra Balog

SPECIAL PROGRAM

Movie Screening: *Kurtág Fragments*

Directed by Dénes Nagy
Saturday, March 28 at 3:30 pm
Jim Ottaway Jr. Film Center
Presented in collaboration with Brooklyn Public Library and The National Film Institute, Hungary

PROGRAM FOUR

Songs, Laments, Dances, Games

Saturday, March 28 at 7 pm
Chapel of the Holy Innocents

Béla Bartók (1881–1945)

Selections from *For Children*
Peasant's Flute
Children at Play
Pillow Dance
Hey, Tulip, Tulip
Round Dance
I Lost My Partner
Bagpipe II
Drinking Song
Children's Dance
Dance Song
Ivy Chen, cimbalom
András Szalai, piano

György Kurtág (b. 1926)

***Tre pezzi*, Op. 38**
Dávid Kéringer, clarinet
András Szalai, cimbalom

György Kurtág

Un brin de bruyère à Witold
(In memoriam Witold Lutosławski)
Ivy Chen, cimbalom

György Kurtág

Hommage à Halmágyi Mihály
Sophia Cornicello, piano
András Szalai, cimbalom

György Ligeti (1923–2006)

***Automne à Varsovie* from Études**
Sophia Cornicello, piano

György Kurtág

***Herdecker Eurhythmie*, Op. 14a**
Self-Will
Hommage à J. S. B.
Flowers We Are (1)
Quarrel and Gentleness
Flowers We Are (2)
Liliána Szokol, flute
András Szalai, cimbalom

György Kurtág

Selections from *Játékok (Games)*
Beating
Tumble-bunny
Bluebell
Thistle
Labyrinthine D (with echo)
Vigorously
Hommage à Emil Petrovics
Stubbunny
Alexandra Balog, piano
András Szalai, cimbalom

György Kurtág

Hommage à Berényi Ferenc 70
Nathaniel Valsania, cimbalom

François Couperin (1668–1733)

Les Bergères (The Shepherdesses)
Nathaniel Valsania, cimbalom
András Szalai, piano

Béla Bartók

Sonatina
Dávid Kéringer, clarinet
András Szalai, cimbalom

INTERMISSION

Béla Bartók

***Falun* (Village Scenes), Sz. 78, BB 87a**
Lucy Fitz Gibbons, soprano
Kayo Iwama, piano

György Kurtág

***Egy téli alkony emlékére (In Memory of a Winter Sunset)*, Op. 8**
1. Vivo
2. Sostenuto
3. Con moto, pesante
4. Presto agitato
Daphne Buan, soprano
András Szalai, cimbalom
Mira Wang, violin

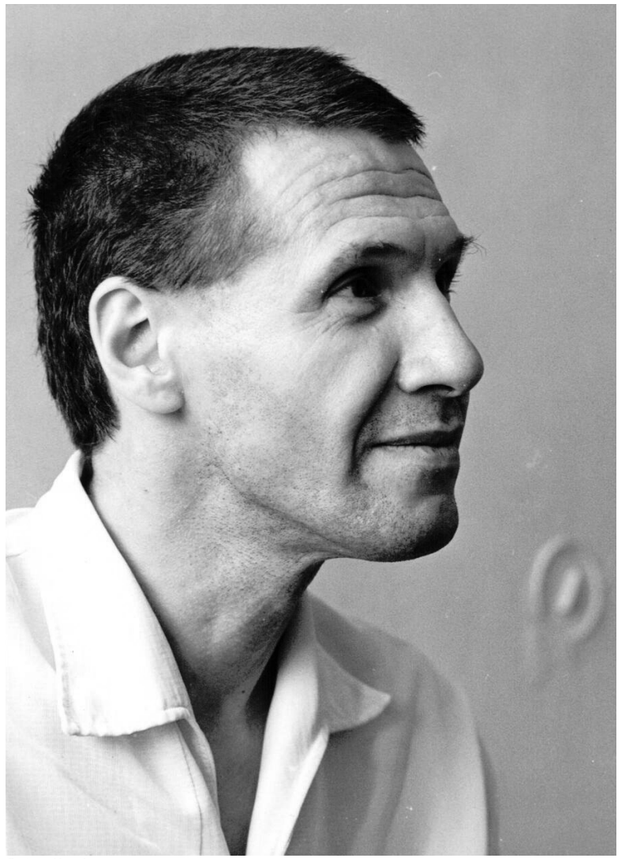
Thomas Adès (b. 1971)

***Növények (Plants)* for mezzo-soprano and piano sextet**
Sydney Cornett, mezzo-soprano
Mira Wang, violin
Ziheng Xu, violin
Mason Haskett, viola
William Pilgrim, cello
Moises Chirinos, double bass
Alexandra Balog, piano

PROGRAM FIVE

Preconcert Lecture with Gergely Fazekas
***"I compose to seek the truth"*: The Musical Universe of György Kurtág**
Sunday, March 29 at 1:30 pm
Conservatory Performance Space

"The final masterpiece of twentieth-century music." Alex Ross, music critic for *The New Yorker*, so described György Kurtág's first opera, *Fin de partie*, which premiered in 2018 at La Scala in Milan. What makes Kurtág one of the most important voices in contemporary music in the 21st century, despite his reluctance toward fame and recognition, and despite a career that was restricted for decades behind the Iron Curtain in communist Hungary? How does he think about music, and how does he frame the "truth" he seeks in composing? These are the questions that musicologist Gergely Fazekas, associate professor at the Liszt Academy in Budapest, seeks to answer.


György Kurtág

Kurtág, Mozart, and the Bach Family

Sunday, March 29 at 3 pm
Conservatory Performance Space

C. P. E. Bach (1714–88)
Rondo in G Major, Wq. 59, No. 2
András Kemenes, piano

György Kurtág (b. 1926)
J. S. Bach (1685–1750)
Three Chorale Preludes for piano four hands
Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr, BWV 711
Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir, BWV 687
Das alte Jahr vergangen ist, BWV 614
András Kemenes, piano
Benjamin Hochman, piano

György Kurtág
Selections from *Játékok (Games)*
András Kemenes, piano

György Kurtág
Wind Quintet, Op. 2 for flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, and bassoon
Christian Middy, flute
Kai O'Donnell, oboe
Mohammad AbdNikfarjam, clarinet
Dominik Kovács, horn
Adelaide Braunhill, bassoon

INTERMISSION

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91)
Andante with Five Variations for piano four hands, K. 501
András Kemenes, piano
Benjamin Hochman, piano

Quintet for Piano and Winds, K. 452
Alexandra Knoll, oboe
Noemi Sallai, clarinet
Dominik Kovács, horn
Philip McNaughton, bassoon
Benjamin Hochman, piano

PROGRAM SIX

György Kurtág in Context: Bach, Bartók, and Kurtág

Brooklyn Public Library's Classical Interludes Series
Saturday, April 4 at 4 pm
Dr. S. Stevan Dweck Cultural Center
Central Library, Brooklyn Public Library, New York City

Béla Bartók (1881–1945)
***Falun* (Village Scenes), Sz. 78, BB 87a**
Lucy Fitz Gibbons, soprano
Kayo Iwama, piano

György Kurtág (b. 1926)
J. S. Bach (1685–1750)
Selections from Kurtág, *Játékok (Games)* interwoven with movements of Bach, Partita No. 2 in C Minor, BWV 826
Benjamin Hochman, piano

György Kurtág
***Tre pezzi*, Op. 38**
Dávid Kéringer, clarinet
András Szalai, cimbalom

Béla Bartók
Sonatina
Dávid Kéringer, clarinet
András Szalai, cimbalom

György Kurtág
***Szálkák (Splinters)* for cimbalom, Op. 6c**

J. S. Bach
Largo and Allegro assai from Sonata No. 3 in C Major, BWV 1005
András Szalai, cimbalom

Béla Bartók
Romanian Folk Dances
András Szalai, cimbalom
Benjamin Hochman, piano

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

(Remarks on some works will be presented from the stage.)

PROGRAM ONE

György Kurtág's bonds with the music of Franz Schubert and Robert Schumann are long-standing and profound. In his teaching, Kurtág has penetrated the music of these two great Romantics as deeply as anyone. As a composer, he learned from them how to respond to the poetic word in an extremely nuanced and expressive way. He has frequently spoken about how he used to play through this great song literature at home, accompanying his wife Márta's singing.

In one of his major chamber works, *Hommage à R. Sch.*, Kurtág channeled Florestan, Eusebius, and Meister Raro, the three imaginary characters who play such important roles in Schumann's music and prose. As for Schubert, Kurtág's spiritual kinship with him is most apparent when their works are performed side by side, as they were by Pierre-Laurent Aimard at our 2023 Kurtág Festival, and as they will be done tonight by Benjamin Appl. (For an entire program of Schubert and Kurtág juxtaposed, see Appl's recent album *Lines of Life: Schubert & Kurtág*, where the baritone can be heard alongside Aimard as well as James Baillieu.)

Four Schuster Songs (1996–2023)
György Kurtág
Born in Lugoj, Romania, 1926

German poet Ulrike Schuster was the recipient of a brief homage (" . . . a flower for Ulrike Schuster . . . ," 1998), published in the seventh volume of Kurtág's *Játékok* (*Games*). Two years earlier, the composer had set two of Schuster's epigrammatic poems, "Die Zeit" and "Physalis alkagengi," which resonate with the end-of-the-world visions of Samuel Beckett—arguably one of Kurtág's most defining literary experiences. He then added two more ("Die Rosen" and "Ich weiß nicht"). All four songs were recorded by Benjamin Appl and Pierre-Laurent Aimard for *Lines of Life*. The tone of the two earlier songs is mostly tender and meditative, with only a few moments where the emotional temperature rises. "Physalis alkagengi" is based on the B-A-C-H motif, whose chromatic melodic line Kurtág assimilated into his own chromatic harmonic idiom. The two more recent songs are extremely brief and dominated by powerful dramatic gestures, driving home the idea of misfortune and the impossibility of knowing.

Portrait of Kurtág I, Alexander Polzin, 2016

Portrait of Kurtág II, Alexander Polzin, 2016

Rondo in A Major, D. 951 (for piano four hands) (1828)
Franz Schubert
Born in Vienna-Himmelpfortgrund, 1797
Died in Vienna, 1828

The piano duet is one of the most intimate forms of chamber music. Two players sharing the same instrument have to sit pretty close to one another on the bench to reach all the necessary notes. In the early 19th century, piano duets were particularly popular in Vienna, since many accomplished amateurs enjoyed playing such works at home. Duet composition was an area in which Franz Schubert was greatly successful, and he wrote more piano duets than almost any other great composer. Yet his four-hand works are significant not only because of their quantity but also because of the great care he lavished on them. Many of the duets are rather challenging, both technically and in terms of emotional expression.

The present rondo was composed in the last year of Schubert's life and published in the year following his untimely death. Its gorgeous main melody undergoes a number of subtle transformations, and alternates with episodes that, while slightly more animated, never quite break the serenity of the composition.

***Hölderlin-Gesänge*, Op. 35a (1993–97)**
György Kurtág

In 1993–94, when Kurtág lived in Berlin as a fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg (Institute for Advanced Study) zu Berlin, he met and befriended Dietrich E. Sattler (1939–2023), editor-in-chief of the complete critical edition of the works of Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843). Hölderlin was a Greek scholar, a philosopher, and an early champion of German unity—as well as a deeply tragic figure who, following mental collapse, spent half of his life in a tower in Tübingen under the care of a cabinetmaker named Ernst Zimmer. Hölderlin wrote some of his most beautiful poems in that tower.

Hölderlin's poetry is extremely complex, and that complexity is what attracted Kurtág. During his time in Berlin, the composer set a number of Hölderlin poems (including several fragments) to music, mostly for unaccompanied voice. He later published five of these as *Hölderlin-Gesänge*, Op. 35a—together with a sixth poem, written about Hölderlin, by Paul Celan (1920–70), a deeply tragic figure in German poetry in his own right.

In a conversation with Benjamin Appl that can be heard on *Lines of Life*, Appl noted that he found one of the Hölderlin poems "almost impossible to understand." Kurtág replied, "Yes, and it was precisely because I didn't understand it that I set it to music—and that's how I came to understand it." The comment is revealing: setting a poem to music is always an act of interpretation—an act of getting inside the text and making it one's own. In the process, many passages that seem obscure at first become accessible on an emotional level to composer, performer, and listener alike.

With only one exception, the *Hölderlin-Gesänge* dispenses with all instrumental accompaniment. Because of this, the pieces become less "art songs" in the usual sense of the term than heightened readings of the poems, where we may visualize the lonely poet in the tower reciting his lines to himself. The exception—where Kurtág added a trombone and a tuba—was motivated by the text. As the composer explained, the poet "actually wants to continue singing, but the choir of the underworld, as in the Orpheus legend, interrupts him. . . . Here I needed the brass for dramatic effect."

The last song—Celan's "Tübingen, Jänner"—is the 20th-century poet's evocation of his predecessor, with quotes from Hölderlin and allusions to the tower. Just as Hölderlin was cut off from the world in the tower, Celan had to confront the impossibility of meaningful communication, using the image of a patriarch who could only babble.

The mysterious final word, "*Pallaksch*," has given rise to multiple interpretations. Hölderlin's young friend Christoph Schwab reported that, while visiting the tower, he heard the sick poet use it on numerous occasions. Since Hölderlin apparently screamed the word, one can imagine how Schwab might have been frightened by it. The most likely explanation for its use, proposed by a French scholar some 40 years ago, is actually not scary at all: "Pallaksch" could have been nothing but the Greek word *pallax*, "young man," pronounced with a Swabian accent. Yet despite its simplicity and plausibility, this interpretation has not been universally accepted, and many recent commentators still consider the word nonsensical. Kurtág himself offered a very different interpretation in his conversation with Appl. The point is that the word was considered unintelligible by both Celan and Kurtág. Those who heard it could not understand what it was supposed to mean.

PROGRAM TWO

Canon & Fugue (2007)
George Benjamin
Born in London, England, 1960

from *The Art of Fugue* (ca. 1742)
Johann Sebastian Bach
Born in Eisenach, Germany, 1685
Died in Leipzig, Germany, 1750

We will never know for sure for which instrument—or instruments—Johann Sebastian Bach intended in his *Art of Fugue*, a monumental collection of pieces that stands as the summation of his work as contrapuntist. For a long time, its 19 movements (the last movement unfinished), all based on the same theme, were thought to have been written in Bach's final years. We now know that they actually date to the early 1740s. Some of the pieces are idiomatic for keyboard, others might seem to call for a string ensemble, yet the extant source indicates no instrumentation anywhere.

George Benjamin, one of the most prominent living British composers, applied his unique sense of color to two of the movements, using an ensemble of nine instruments (one flute, two horns, three violins, two violas, and one cello). The result is a compelling personal interpretation of this music, which has been studied and analyzed for a good 200 years without ever yielding all its secrets.

The first movement Benjamin chose for adaptation is the "Canon in Hypodiapason," or canon at the lower octave. This piece, written for only two voices, is in the style of a gigue dance. For its entire duration, the second voice follows the first one, note for note, an octave lower. Benjamin's adaptation, though, incorporates some long-held pedal tones, adding extra voices to Bach's strict two-part writing.

The second arrangement, "Contrapunctus 7," is a four-part work, although an unexpected fifth voice appears in the final measures. Here, Bach used his theme simultaneously in both diminution (with halved note values) and augmentation (with doubled note values). Thus, one voice always moves much more slowly than the others. Benjamin accentuated this contrast by giving the fast-moving voices to the pizzicato strings, allowing the slow-moving voice to emerge almost like a *cantus firmus* in a chorale fantasy.

***Schnee* (Snow): *Ten Canons for Nine Instruments* (2006–08)**
Hans Abrahamsen
Born in Copenhagen, Denmark, 1952

Instrumentation
Group 1: violin, viola, cello (with the C string tuned down to G), piano.
Group 2: flute (doubling alto flute), oboe (doubling English horn), clarinet (doubling small clarinet in E-flat and bass clarinet), piano.
The percussion participates in both groups.

> Snow falls. So: I will go on in the snow. I will have my hope with me. I look up, as if I could see the snow as it falls, as if I could keep my eye on a little of it and see it come down all the way to the ground.
> —Hans Abrahamsen, *Let Me Tell You* (words by Paul Griffiths)

In 2016, Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen received the Grawemeyer Award, the unofficial Nobel Prize of composition, for his orchestral song cycle *Let Me Tell You*. The work is a musical portrait of William Shakespeare's character Ophelia, and it sets a text by Paul Griffiths composed entirely of words the heroine utters in *Hamlet*. When Ophelia is watching the snow fall in the final song, the music evokes the winter atmosphere in a way that has few parallels in the literature of music.

Snowy landscapes have been present in Abrahamsen's music since the beginning of his career; the composer wrote *Winternacht* (Winter Night) in 1976 and *Zwei Schneetänze* (Two Snow Dances) in 1985. Yet the hour-long *Schnee* (Snow), written between 2006 and 2008 for nine instruments, took snow painting to an entirely different level, both in terms of complexity and emotional impact.

Schnee consists of 10 canons. Abrahamsen recalls the first ideas for the piece came from arranging some J. S. Bach canons, though this is hardly apparent to the listener: Unlike in Bach's canons, the voices of *Schnee* are not distinguishable by ear, as Abrahamsen chose not to give them recognizable melodic and rhythmic profiles. The canonic parts are, instead, composed mainly of repeated notes or short motifs with distinctive timbres, often a result of nonconventional playing techniques. When such musical materials are treated canonically, one hears the complexity of the call and response or layering of instrumental parts, but the individuality of the parts is, as it were, "buried beneath the snow." These are singular, monolithic canons in which traditional canonic techniques (inversions, strettos, and others) are present but serve an entirely different purpose than they do in Bach. Individual snowflakes may make many "entrances" as they fall and hit the ground, but the snowfall itself creates a single, undifferentiated impression.

The 10 canons of the work form five pairs. Within each pair, the second canon in some way "recomposes" the first, either with increased or decreased instrumentation, or through other structural changes. Three times during the piece, the canons are interrupted by short sections marked "Intermezzos," in which certain instruments are retuned to a sixth of a tone lower, according to precise instructions in the score.

The pairs of canons become shorter and shorter as the work progresses. Each canon is itself subdivided into contrasting parts: 1a, with its extremely high registers, has a faster and louder middle section, after which the softer initial material returns, while 1b offers a variation on the same material with longer legato lines, eerie piano glissandos, and a special sound produced by the percussionist moving a piece of paper on differently textured surfaces.

The second pair of canons, according to Abrahamsen's tempo marking, is to be "cheerful but not too cheerful, always a bit melancholy." The words "Es ist Schnee" ("It is snow") and "Winternacht" ("Winter night") are written into the instrumental parts to indicate the appropriate tempo and accentuation. Following the first intermezzo's retuning, the muffled sounds of Canon 2a are replaced by sonorities with considerably more "definition."

Canons 3a and 3b are played in an extremely slow tempo—"in the tempo of Tai Chi," Abrahamsen observes—and "sorrowfully." In 3a, the isolated gestures of the three strings and three winds seem entirely frozen in time. In 3b, as the two pianos and the percussion (paper on smooth surface) take over, the new timbres "illuminat[e]" the same music from a different side.

Following a second retuning intermezzo, Canon 4a introduces a pair of sleigh bells in homage to Mozart, who used such bells in his popular Three German Dances, K. 605. Marked "German Dance," this "stormy, restless and nervous" movement uses the entire ensemble in both its "a" and "b" canons. The first canon is marked "minore," the second "maggiore," which must be understood in a figurative sense: in the second canon, the intervallic structures are different from those of the first, just as they are

in the case of classical major and minor keys. Each of the canons is cast in a trio form that is similar to that in Mozart's dances. Abrahamsen's central trio section is noticeably calmer than the surrounding music, and in both the "a" and "b" canons, the recapitulation of the first section must sound softer than the original, "as if heard from a distance." Another brief retuning intermezzo follows these movements.

The final pair of canons—the shortest of the five—call for the same instrumentation, this time a sextet rather than the full ensemble. The canons are marked *rectus* ("straight") and *inversus* ("inverted"), although each canon in itself includes contrary motion, so each is both *rectus* and *inversus* at the same time. This "simple and childlike" pair inhabits the same uppermost registers as the first pair. After the considerable rhythmic complications in the earlier segments, each part now moves in smooth and even eighth notes (or multiples thereof), for a soothing and reassuring conclusion.

PROGRAM THREE

Bach Inventions and Sinfonias, BWV 772–801 (1720–23)
Johann Sebastian Bach
Born in Eisenach, Germany, 1685
Died in Leipzig, Germany, 1750

Bach's purpose in writing his 15 two-part inventions and 15 three-part sinfonias was primarily pedagogical, yet at no point did he simplify his style to accommodate his students. Each one of these 30 short compositions is a contrapuntal masterpiece in miniature, serving not only as keyboard exercises but also as introductions to the art of composition. As the title page of the fair copy states:

> Sincere instruction, in which lovers of the keyboard, especially those who are keen to learn, are shown a clear method, not only of learning to play clearly in two parts but also, after further progress, of dealing well and correctly with three obbligato parts. At the same time they are shown not only how to come by good ideas but also how to develop them well. Above all, however, they are shown how to arrive at a *cantabile* style of playing, while also acquiring a strong foretaste of composition.

The word "invention" had two interrelated meanings for Bach. On one hand, it stood for the creative idea that is at the root of all composition. On the other, it designated a type of contrapuntal writing that is simpler, overall, than what is found in fugues. The inventions and sinfonias thus serve to prepare the student for the complexities of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, in which many of the preludes structurally resemble "inventions." The pieces in both sets follow the same key sequence, traversing the most commonly used keys in ascending order:

C major - C minor - D major - D minor - E-flat major - E major - E minor - F major - F minor - G major - G minor - A major - B-flat major - B minor

PROGRAM FOUR

***Falun* (Village Scenes), Sz. 78, BB 87a (1924)**
Béla Bartók
Born in Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary [now Sânnicolau Mare, Romania], 1881
Died in New York, New York, 1945

For Béla Bartók, the pursuits of composer, pianist, and ethnomusicologist were mutually inclusive, constantly nurturing and influencing one another. During his field trips, the Hungarian composer recorded thousands of melodies and arranged many of them into original compositions, which he often performed in the concert hall. Even in cases where he didn't use any traditional folk melodies, his compositional style was informed by his ethnomusicological studies. Additionally, in having conservatory-trained musicians such as himself perform folk-song arrangements, he intended to highlight the value and beauty of peasant culture, which had long been neglected and unappreciated.

Pre–World War I Hungary, where Bartók did his fieldwork at the time, was a multiethnic country within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. From the very beginning of his career, Bartók worked on Romanian and Slovak folk music as well as music in the Hungarian tradition, paying particular attention to the comparative study of the three.

Under the title *Village Scenes—Falun* in Hungarian and *Dedinské scény* in Slovak—Bartók published a set of arrangements of Slovak folk songs, which he collected in the Zvolen district of what is now Slovakia in 1915. In December 1926, he gave the first complete performance of the five-movement cycle with contralto Mária Basilides in Budapest. That same year, he arranged the last three songs for four (or eight) female voices and a chamber ensemble, at the request of the League of Composers in New York, which premiered this version under the direction of Serge Koussevitzky in November 1926.

The solo version was dedicated to Bartók's second wife, Ditta Pásztory. David Cooper, in his influential Bartók monograph, describes the piece as "working its way through haymaking (a site of courting), bridal preparations, wedding and childbirth, and ending with a celebratory young men's dance." The influence of Igor Stravinsky's landmark *Les noces* ("Wedding") is unmistakable, yet Bartók's work—even in the ensemble version—is on a much smaller scale and is thus more intimate. Bartók adopted the folk practice of ululation (a protracted, high-pitched howl) in the third song, and applied his personal harmonic style to the folk melodies throughout. The fourth movement, "Lullaby," marks the emotional high point of the work by virtue of its gripping melody and particularly expressive piano part; it seems no coincidence that Béla and Ditta's son Peter was born in 1924, the same year *Falun* was written. The rambunctious fifth movement, which begins with a virtuosic piano solo, ends the work on an energetic note.

***Egy téli alkony emlékére (In Memory of a Winter Sunset)*, Op. 8 (1969)**
György Kurtág
Born in Lugoj, Romania, 1926

These four "fragments," as György Kurtág called them, were first performed in the eastern Hungarian city of Debrecen on May 18, 1969, with soprano Alice Németh, violinist Judit Hevesi, and cimbalom player Márta Fábián. The lyrics are by Pál Gulyás (1899–1944), a native and lifelong resident of Debrecen, and the work was composed not only in memory of a sunset but also in memory of the poet on the 25th anniversary of his death. While Gulyás's work is lesser known today, he had a unique poetic voice that combined modernistic imagery with a certain songlike quality. Kurtág's setting, though, is not exactly "songlike"—rather, the human voice is often treated as one of the instruments alongside the violin and the cimbalom. The poems themselves speak to nostalgia, the pain of parting, and a faint hope for a possible reunion. In the music are traces of the epochal *Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*, which immediately precedes it in Kurtág's catalog. Some moments even anticipate Kurtág's magnum opus from the 1970s, the *Messages of the Late R. V. Troussova*.

***Növények (Plants)* for mezzo-soprano and piano sextet (2022)**
Thomas Adès
Born in London, England, 1971

Just as George Benjamin did the decade prior, Thomas Adès took the British musical scene by storm at the age of 20. After the premiere of his Chamber Symphony, a critic for *The New Yorker* called Adès "the frighteningly talented boy wonder of English music." In 2000, Adès became the youngest person ever to receive the Grawemeyer Award. His works have been performed all over the world; as a composer, pianist, conductor, and teacher, he is one of the most influential living figures in classical music.

As a young man, Adès studied with György Kurtág at the International Musicians Seminar in Prussia Cove (Cornwall, England), and has retained an admiration for Hungarian music and culture ever since. After reading the poem "Gyökér" (Root) by Miklós Radnóti (1909–44) in a bilingual volume, Adès immediately thought about setting it to music. This poem was written in a forced-labor camp in Serbia where Radnóti—a Jewish-born convert to Catholicism—was taken in the summer of 1944. Following a forced march back to Hungary, the poet was murdered on November 9 of the same year. A notebook containing "Gyökér" and nine other poems was found in the pocket of his trench coat after his death.

Adès has enjoyed an artistic partnership with Hungarian mezzo-soprano Katalin Károlyi for many years. Károlyi was the dedicatee of one of György Ligeti's last works, *Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedűvel* ("With Pipes, Drums, and Reed Fiddles"), in which the singer was joined by four percussionists. The first version of Adès's *Gyökér* was written for the same combination of forces, and as a companion piece for the Ligeti. Later, when Adès decided to write a whole song cycle for Károlyi, he created a new version of *Gyökér* (dedicated to Kurtág), alongside six other Hungarian poems, which the singer helped the composer select, translate, and analyze. All the poems had to do with flowers or other vegetation in one way or another, hence the title *Növények* (Plants). The work premiered at London's Wigmore Hall on November 26, 2022.

Adès arranged the seven poems chronologically, from the oldest to the most recent. "Kertész leszek" (I'll be a gardener) by Attila József (1905–37), perhaps the most beloved of all Hungarian poets, is playful and idyllic until the last two lines, amazing in their ability to be shocking and soothing at the same time. The Radnóti poem is second, followed by no fewer than four poems by Sándor Weöres (1913–89), whose virtuosic use of sound and rhythm is unparalleled in Hungarian literature. (Ligeti's "With Pipes, Drums and Reed Fiddles" was based in its entirety on Weöres's poems.) One of the poems set by Adès, "Galagonya" ("Haw Berry"), has been particularly popular in Hungary, and was set in folk style by Ferenc Sebő in the 1990s. The cycle ends with a poem by Ottó Orbán (1936–2002), a true "polystylist" in whose work old poetic forms acquired entirely new levels of meaning.

The seven poems are linked by their adherence to meter and, for the most part, rhyme; such traditional elements remain present in a great deal of Hungarian poetry to this day. The influence of folk song can often be felt in these texts, which borrow not only structural elements (eight-syllable lines or alternating lines with seven and six syllables) but also poetic imagery (flowers and deep wells as metaphors for love) from the folk tradition. Adès's vocal part, which tends to plumb the lowest depths of the female voice, avoids any direct allusions to Hungarian folk music, yet it carefully observes the prosody and the declamatory patterns of folk song.

The instrumental lines add a multitude of fascinating colors to the music. They whip the lively rhythms of "Galagonya" into a state of near frenzy and, in the next song, form a kind of heterophonic (only loosely coordinated) canon with the vocals, representing a never-ending thread of the garland. The deceptively simple final song makes reference to the *virágének* ("flower song")—a type of Hungarian love poetry whose origins can be traced back to the 15th century. Adès avoided dramatizing the ending, where delight turns to bitterness. He did not choose to highlight that emotional contrast; rather, he carefully preserved the archaic flavor of the poem while putting his own personal stamp on it.

PROGRAM FIVE

Rondo in G Major, Wq. 59, No. 2 (1779)
Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach
Born in Weimar, Germany, 1714
Died in Hamburg, Germany, 1788

When musicians spoke of Bach in the second half of the 18th century, they often meant Carl Philipp Emanuel rather than his father Johann Sebastian, whose music was largely neglected and known to just a handful of admirers at that time. The old Bach's second son, on the other hand, was one of the most celebrated German musicians of

his generation. After serving in the court of Frederick the Great in Potsdam, he became music director for the churches in the major port city of Hamburg. An extremely prolific composer of orchestral, choral, and keyboard music, he wrote one of the most important books on performance practice in the 18th century. Bach is often associated with the so-called *empfindsamer Stil* ("sensitive style"); his music abounds in innovative gestures that will surprise even a 21st-century listener.

Bach wrote some of his most radical works in the 1770s and '80s, when he was in his 60s and 70s. He reached the high point of his output as a keyboard composer with six volumes of sonatas, rondos, and fantasies published between 1779 and 1787, written, as the title indicates, *für Kenner und Liebhaber* ("for connoisseurs and music lovers"). Through the precise designation of his intended audiences, Bach emphasized that he was addressing himself to players at all levels of musical expertise. Out of a total of 37 works, 13 are rondos—but they are utterly different from what any other composer produced under that label. Lacking the contrasting episodes one would find in a rondo by Haydn or Mozart, they tend to include, instead, virtuoso passagework between the appearances of the rondo theme. That rondo theme wanders from key to key in the course of the pieces, reaching tonalities quite remote from the point of departure.

András Kemenes will perform the first rondo from volume 5 of the *Kenner und Liebhaber* series. This volume was published in 1785, but the Rondo in G Major was composed six years earlier, in 1779. Throughout the piece, Bach carefully marked the dynamics, often juxtaposing pianissimo and fortissimo in the same measure. As a final surprise, he transformed the opening phrase of the rondo theme into an energetic closing gesture, played by the left hand in octaves, in fortissimo.

Wind Quintet, Op. 2 for flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, and bassoon (1959)
György Kurtág
Born in Lugoj, Romania, 1926

After a life-changing year of studies and introspection in Paris, a 32-year-old Kurtág returned to Hungary, ready to start his mature composing life. If the String Quartet, Op. 1, and the Wind Quintet, Op. 2—both written in 1959—marked a new beginning for Kurtág, they also opened a new chapter in the history of Hungarian music in general, as they announced a clear break from the style based on Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály, and folk music that had been predominant throughout the 1950s.

Kurtág came back from Paris armed with such new techniques as serialism (in which all 12 tones of the chromatic scale are used in a systematic fashion) and aleatory (in which the different instrumental parts are only partially coordinated in time, if they are at all). He employed both techniques in Opus 2, but did so in his own way and sounding nothing like any putative models.

The Wind Quintet consists of eight short movements with a duration of about nine minutes altogether. Within this restricted scope, Kurtág achieved an astonishing degree of variety, greatly challenging the first performers, the members of the Budapest Wind Quintet, for whom this style must have felt rather new in 1959.

The pointillistic textures of the first movement were clearly influenced by the music of Anton Webern—an influence that was always emphasized in discussions of Kurtág's early opuses. Yet later in the quintet, Kurtág explores other stylistic worlds. In the Agitato second movement, the Webernesque gestures are placed in a different context: dispensing with bar lines, Kurtág gives the music a powerful (and not really Webern-like) dramatic profile, ending with a dolcissimo horn solo.

The third movement is dominated by nervous gestures set against rapid repeated notes—a combination that will return in the seventh movement, but with a much slower tempo and the gestures much attenuated. Before then, the fourth movement (Molto sostenuto) brings with it some mysterious tremolos and distant memories of the "Elegy" from Béla Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra. All the instrumental parts of the fifth movement are fully written out, though their alignment in time is left to the performers in a bold aleatoric experiment, and movement six comes in brash and vibrant before dissolving into a chorale-like dolcissimo phrase. The work ends with another aleatoric movement, but, where the fifth movement nearly resembles a concert of birds à la Olivier Messiaen (whose classes Kurtág had attended in Paris), the eighth is "molto agitato" and, at the end, leaves its listeners in a state of suspense.

Andante with Five Variations for piano four hands, K. 501 (1786)
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Born in Salzburg, Austria, 1756
Died in Vienna, Austria, 1791

In a famous painting of the Mozart family from 1780–81, father Leopold is standing by the piano; his wife, Anna Maria, who passed away in 1778, is represented by a portrait on the wall. Their two adult children, Maria Anna ("Nannerl") and Wolfgang, are sitting at the piano, playing four hands.

Four-hand piano music was a very popular form of domestic music making in the 18th and 19th centuries; Mozart wrote various works, including sonatas, for such occasions. The present set of variations, written when Mozart was at the height of his artistic maturity, is one of the most technically demanding of his piano duets. Interestingly, he wrote only five variations instead of the usual six, with the *minore* (variation in the minor mode) in fourth place. Through the ever-changing pianistic textures, each variation reveals some new facets of the seemingly simple, but actually quite sophisticated, theme. In the first two variations, the pianists take turns playing rapid passagework; in the third, they present the theme in imitation. *Minore* variations often introduce some chromatic harmonies, and the present work is no exception. The final variation, the most elaborate of the five, includes an unexpected tonal digression, followed by a brief recapitulation of the theme in its original form.

Quintet for Piano and Winds, K. 452 (1784)
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

This unique masterwork is a singular cross between a concerto and a chamber music composition. Written for an instrumentation that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart used just this once, the Quintet for Piano and Winds is contemporaneous with a series of piano concertos that brought the composer some of the greatest successes of his life. In many of these concertos, Mozart gave extensive solos to the woodwinds and the horn, such that many passages sound almost like chamber music between the piano and the soloists. That sound idea takes center stage in the quintet and becomes the generating force of the piece.

One might think, "Sound as a generating force of a piece? Isn't that, quintessentially, a 20th-century phenomenon?" In a way, yes, it is—if one thinks of the sophisticated explorations of musical color introduced by Claude Debussy. Yet it is clear that in this Mozart quintet, the ever-changing coloristic combinations of the piano, oboe, clarinet, horn and bassoon are the defining element, perhaps even more important than the melodies and harmonies, exquisite though they are.

This fascination derives from the fact that, unlike in a string quartet, each of the five instruments has a different timbre; therefore, each instrument preserves a degree of independence even as it blends with its neighbors. This can be observed right away in the opening largo, whose simple E-flat and B-flat chords are like no E-flat or B-flat chords we have heard before. As the five instruments pass the melody among themselves, we witness a true rainbow of musical colors, and Mozart is sure to treat all instruments as equals.

To be sure, the piano—Mozart's own instrument—is often "the first among equals," but each wind player also gets plenty of solo turns. Both the first and second movements are in sonata form, which, through the required recapitulation section, allows the composer to assign the same musical material to different players the second time around. In the last movement, a rondo is once again the musical form—the rondo theme alternating with episodes—that produces coloristic variety, as the various sections are differentiated by their instrumentation. At the finish, we hear a regular, concerto-like cadenza—though this is a cadenza in which all five instruments participate and, therefore, improvisation is not an option.

This quintet was first performed at the Burgtheater in Vienna on April 1, 1784. Nine days later, Mozart wrote to his father that the quintet had "called forth the greatest applause." And he did not hesitate to add: "I myself consider it to be the best work I have ever composed"—big words indeed. Others admired the work no less; in 1796, Beethoven paid the ultimate compliment by writing a quintet for the same instrumentation and the same key of E-flat major (Op. 16) as an obvious homage to Mozart, who had died five years earlier.

—Peter Laki, *Visiting Associate Professor of Music Emeritus*

TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

PROGRAM ONE

György Kurtág (b. 1926)
Four Songs (lyrics by Ulrike Schuster)

Ulrike Schuster: Die Rosen
Die Rosen durchwandern die Bäume
Und das Unglück durchwuchert die
Menschen.

Ulrike Schuster: The Roses
Roses wander through trees
And misfortune grows rampant through
humans.

Ulrike Schuster: Die Zeit
Die Zeit ist dunkel.
Die Zeit ist schieres Fleisch
In einer Haut durch die
Kein Licht dringen kann.

Zeit verwest und blutet.

Ulrike Schuster: Time
Time is dark.
Time is sheer meat
In a skin through which
No light can penetrate.

Time decays and bleeds.

Ulrike Schuster: Ich weiß nicht
Ich weiß nicht.
Das ist die sicherste Auskunft,
die ich zu geben vermag.

Ulrike Schuster: I Don't Know
I don't know.
That is the most reliable information
I am able to give.

Ulrike Schuster: Physalis alkagengi
Ganz langsam
fast unmerklich
aber doch rasch
verlöschen die Laternen
das lichte Gelbrot
der verwilderten Gartenstauden,
deren Hüllblätter eine Beere,
Judenkirsche genannt,
vollendet umschließen,
verblasst.

Ulrike Schuster: Physalis alkagengi*
Very slowly
almost imperceptibly
and yet swiftly
the lanterns extinguish
the light red-yellow
of the wild garden shrubs,
lanterns whose husks
completely enclose a berry,
called ground cherry,**
causing it to pale.

* A plant commonly known as "Chinese lantern" (Peter Laki)
** The German name of this plant, used by the poet, literally translates to "Jewish cherry." (Peter Laki)

György Kurtág
***Hölderlin-Gesänge*, Op. 35a**

Friedrich Hölderlin: An...
Elysium
Dort find ich ja
Zu euch ihr Todesgötter
Dort Diotima Heroen

Singen möcht ich von dir
Aber nur Thränen.
Und in der Nacht in der ich wandle erlöscht mir dein
Klares Auge
himmlischer Geist.

Friedrich Hölderlin: To...
Elysium
For that is where I
Shall find you, O gods of death,
There Diotima Heroes.

I would fain sing of you
But only tears.
And in the night where I walk, your limpid gaze
Is extinguished,
heavenly spirit.

Friedrich Hölderlin: Im Walde
Du edles Wild.

Aber in Hütten wohnet der Mensch, und hüllet sich ein ins verschämte Gewand, denn inniger ist, achtsamer auch und dass er bewahre den Geist, wie die Priesterin die himmlische Flamme, dies ist sein Verstand. Und darum ist die Willkür ihm und höhere Macht zu fehlen und zu vollbringen, dem Götterähnlichen, der Güter Gefährlichstes, die Sprache dem Menschen gegeben, damit er schaffend, zerstörend, und untergehend, und wiederkehrend zur ewiglebenden, zur Meisterin und Mutter, damit er zeuge, was er sei, geerbet zu haben, gelernt von ihr, ihr Göttlichstes, de allerhaltende Liebe.

Friedrich Hölderlin: In the Forest
You noble wild creature.

But man dwells in huts, and wraps himself in a bashful robe, for he is more fervent, and attentive too, that he may maintain the spirit as the priestess the holy flame—That is his understanding. And that is why the arbitrariness to lack and accomplish the godlike, the most dangerous of goods—language—is given to man so that he might create, destroy, and perish and return to the immortal, to the mistress and mother, that he might bear witness to what he is to have inherited, learnt from her, her most divine [quality], all-sustaining love.

Friedrich Hölderlin: Gestalt und Geist
Alles ist innig
Das scheidet
So birgt der Dichter.

Verwegner! möchtest von Angesicht zu Angesicht
die Seele sehn
Du gehest in Flammen unter.

Friedrich Hölderlin: Form and Spirit
Everything is innerly
That separates
Thus does the poet salvage.

Audacious one! You wish to see the soul face to face,
You will perish in flames.

Friedrich Hölderlin: An Zimmern
Die Linien des Lebens sind verschieden
Wie Wege sind, und wie der Berge Gränzen.
Was wir hier sind, kann dort ein Gott ergänzen
Mit Harmonien und ewigem Lohn und Frieden.

Friedrich Hölderlin: To Zimmer
The lines of life are varied
As paths are and the mountains' boundaries.
What here we are, can there by a god be completed
With harmonies and eternal recompense and peace.

Friedrich Hölderlin: Der Spaziergang
Ihr Wälder schön an der Seite,
Am grünen Abhang gemahlt,
Wo ich umher mich leite,
Durch süße Ruhe bezahlt
Für jeden Stachel im Herzen,
Wann dunkel mir ist der Sinn,
Denn Kunst und Sinnen hat Schmerzen

Gekostet von Anbeginn.
Ihr lieblichen Bilder im Thale.
Zum Beispiel Garten und Baum,
Und dann der Steg der schmale,
Der Bach zu sehen kaum.
Wie schön aus heiterer Ferne
Glänzt einem das herrliche Bild
Der Landschaft, die ich gerne
Besuch' in Witterung mild.
Die Gottheit freundlich geleitet
Uns erstlich mit Blau,
Hernach mit Wolken bereitet,
Gebildet wölkig und grau,
Mit sengenden Blizen und Rollen

Des Donners, mit Reiz des Gefilds,
Mit Schönheit, die gequollen
Vom Quell ursprünglichen Bilds.

Friedrich Hölderlin: The Walk
You forests beautifully painted at the edge
Of the green slope,
Where I make my way,
Rewarded by sweet repose
For every thorn in the heart,
When my mind is dark,
For art and thought have, from the beginning of time,
Cost it pain.
You lovely pictures in the valley,
Garden, for instance, and tree,
And then the narrow footbridge,
The brook hardly visible.
How beautifully from the distance
The splendid picture of that landscape
Gleams at me—a landscape I like to visit
When the weather is mild.
The godhead escorts us kindly,
With blue at first,
Later with clouds prepared for us,
Vaulted and grey in shape,
With searing lightning flashes and the rumbling
Of thunder, with the charm of meadowlands,
With beauty that has welled
From the source of a primal image.

Paul Celan: Tübingen, Jänner
Zur Blindheit über-
redete Augen,
Ihre–"ein
Rätsel ist Rein-
entsprungenes"–, ihre
Erinnerung an
schwimmende Hölderlintürme,
möwen-
umschwirrt.

Besuche ertrunkener Schreiner bei
diesen
tauchenden Worten:
Käme,
käme ein Mensch zur Welt, heute,
mit
dem Lichtbart der
Patriarchen: er dürfte,
spräch er von dieser
Zeit, er
dürfte
nur lallen und lallen
immer-, immer-
zuzu.
„Pallaksch. Pallaksch".

Paul Celan: Tübingen, January
Eyes talked into
blindness.
Their—"an enigma is
the purely
originated"—their
memory of
Hölderlin towers afloat,
en-
circled by whirring gulls.

Visits of drowned carpenters to
these
submerging words:
Were,
were a man,
were a man to come into the world today,
with
the gleaming beard of the
patriarchs: he could,
were he to speak of this
time, he
could
merely babble and babble
over, over
againagain:
Pallaksch. Pallaksch.

Translations from Benjamin Appl, *Lines of Life: Schubert & Kurtág* (Alpha Classics, 2024)

PROGRAM FOUR

Béla Bartók
***Falun* (Village Scenes)**

1. Pri hrabaní
Ej! Hrabajže len, hrabaj
To zelenô seno!
Ej! Ja by ho hrabala,
Nemám nakoseno.

Ej! Hrabala, hrabala,
Čerta nahrabala;
Ej! Od vel'kého spania
Hrable dolámala.

1. While Haymaking
Hey! Rake the hay, rake
the green hay!
Hey! I would rake it,
But I haven't enough hay.

Hey! Rake it up, rake it up,
Rake, devil, rake;
Hey! It was because of a deep sleep
That the rake broke.

2. Pri neveste
Letia pávy, letia, ej,
Drobnô peria tratia,
Devča si ho sbiera
Mesto svojho peria.

Sbieraj si ho, sbieraj, ej,
Veďti treba bude,
Janikovo líčko
Na ňom líhať bude.

2. At the Bride's
The peacocks fly, hey,
Dropping tiny feathers;
The maiden collects them,
A whole city of feathers.

Collect them, collect, hey,
You will need them,
Janik's head
Will lay on them.

3. Svatba
A ty Anča krásna,
Už vo voze kasňa,
Na kasni periny:
Už ťa vyplatili.

A z tejto dediny
Na druhú dedinu
Ideme opáčiť
Novotnú rodinu.

Kasňa je z javora,
Perina z pápera,
A to švarnô devča
Už nemá frajera,

3. Wedding
And you, beautiful Anča,
Already in the wagon,
Duvets in your hope chest:
You've paid your dowry.

And from this village
To the next
We go to meet
The new family.

The chests are made of maple,
The duvets filled with down,
And this pretty girl
Already has no lover,

Keď nemá frajera,
Ale bude muža,
Nebude prekvitať,
Ako v poli ruža.

Now she hasn't a lover
But instead a husband,
She will not flourish
Like in a field of roses.

Ruža som ja, ruža,
Pokým nemám muža,
Keďbudem mať muža,
Spadňe so mna ruža.

A rose I am, a rose,
Until I have a husband,
If I were to have a husband,
Like a rose, I'd fall.

Teraz sa ty, Anča,
Teraz sa oklameš:
My pôjdeme domov
A ty tu ostaneš.

Now you, Anča,
Now you'll be fooled:
We are going home
And you are staying here.

4. Ukoliebavka
Beli že mi, beli
Moj syn premilený!
Či ma budeš chovať,
Ej, na moje starie dni?

4. Lullaby
Sleep, darling, sleep
My poor little son!
Will you care for me,
Oh, in my last years?

– Budem, mamko, budem,
Kým sa neožením;
A keď sa ožením,
Ej, potom vás oddelím.

– I will, Mama, I will
Until I'm married;
And if I'm married,
Oh, then I'll leave you.

– Búvaj že mi, búvaj,
Len ma neunúvaj!
Čo ma viac unúvaš,
Menej sa nabúvaš.

– Shush, shush,
Just don't bother me!
The more you bother me,
The less you will rest.

Belej že sa, belej
Na hori zelenej,
Na hori zelenej,
V košielki bielenej.

Go, darling, go
Into the green wood,
Into the green wood
With your little white shirt.

Košelôčka biela,
Šila ju Mariška,
Šila ju hodvábom
Pod zeleným hájom.

A white shirt,
Sewed by Mariška,
Sewed with silk,
Under a green grove.

Beli že mi, beli
Moj andelik biely,
Len mi neuletej,
Ej, do tej čiernej zemi!

Sleep, darling, sleep,
My little white angel,
Just don't fly from me,
Oh, to the black earth.

5. Tanec mládencov
Poza búčky, poza peň,
Poďže bratu, poďže sem!
Poza búčky a klady,
Tancuj šuhaj za mlady!

5. Lads' Dance
Beyond the oak, beyond the trunk,
Come on, brother, come on over!
Beyond the big oak log,
Dance the dance of youth!

Štyri kozy, piaty cap,
Kto vyskočí, bude chlap!
Ja by som bol vyskočil,
Ale som sa potočil.

Four nanny goats, five billy goats,
Whoever can, stand and dance!
I would have jumped up
But I got jumbled.

Hojže, hojže, od zeme!
Kto mi kozy zaženie?
A ja by ích bol zahnal,
Ale som sa vlka bál.

Hey-o, hey-o, time has come!
Who will herd the goats home?
I would have gladly done it,
But I was afraid of the wolf.

Translations by Lucy Fitz Gibbon

Márta and György Kurtág at the piano

György Kurtág
Egy téli alkony emlékére
(In Memory of a Winter Sunset)
Pál Gulyás (1899–1944)

I

Az órák most hozzák alakját:
mély szeme most száll fel a földből,
arca most száll le a felhőből-
A kettő most sugárzik össze,
hogy a nemlétet összekösse.
Most még nem él, nincs apja, anyja, neve sincs:
Csak az örök béke lebegteti,
a föld emléke . . .

The hours now bring her shape:
her deep eyes now ascend from the earth,
her face now descends from the cloud—
the two rays are now united,
to connect being to nonbeing.
She is not alive yet, has no father or mother, no name:
She only floats about as eternal peace,
the earth's memory . . .

II

Vártalak, s csak az alkony jött el.
Az alkonyban hullt a hó.
Az óraingáról a bú szakadt,
s a hó takarta el az utakat . . .

I was waiting for you, and only the sunset came.
Snow fell at dusk.
The clock was beating in sorrow,
and the roads were covered in snow . . .

III

Mennyi út van, ó mennyi út van!
Hogy futnak keresztül-kasul!
S minden út mögött egy sír árnya.
Kulcsold össze kezed imára.

How many roads there are, oh how many roads!
They run all over, left and right!
And behind each road, the shadow of a grave.
Fold your hands in prayer.

IV

Isten veled! Elránt egy örvény,
A vérnek vándorútja van.
Menj, vándorolj! Elránt a perc kegyetlen,
Látjuk mi még egymást a kék hegyekben.

Farewell! A maelstrom tears me away.
Blood has its own wandering path.
Go wander! The cruel moment tears us apart,
We will see each other yet, in the blue mountains.

Translations by Peter Laki

Thomas Adés
Növények (Plants)

1. *Kertész leszek (I'll be a gardener)*
Attila József (1905–37)

Kertész leszek, fát nevelek,
kelő nappal én is kelek,
nem törődök semmi mással,
csak a beojtott virággal.

I'll be a gardener, I'll raise trees,
with the rising sun I'll also rise,
I won't care about anything else,
just my tended flowers.

Minden beojtott virágom
kedvesem lesz virágáron,
ha csalán lesz, azt se bánom,
igaz lesz majd a virágom.

All my tended flowers
I will cherish for all a flower's worth,
if they're nettles, it won't matter,
I'll be faithful to my flowers.

Tejet iszok és pipázok,
jóhíremre jól vigyázok,
nem ér engem veszedelem,
magamat is elültetem.

I'll drink milk and smoke a pipe,
I'll take care of my good name,
nor will reach me any danger,
I will plant myself too.

Kell ez nagyon, igen nagyon,
napkeleten, napnyugaton --
ha már elpusztul a világ,
legyen a sírjára virág.

This is greatly needed, yes greatly,
in the East and in the West,
if the world's already dying,
let there on its grave be flowers.

György and Márta Kurtág

2. *Gyökér (Root)*
Miklós Radnóti (1909–44)

A gyökérben erő surran,
esőt iszik, földdel él
és az álma hófehér.

In the root a force is scurrying,
rain its drink, earth its food
and its dreams are white as snow.

Föld alól a föld fölé tör,
kúszik s ravasz a gyökér,
karja akár a kötél.

From below earth it strains above earth,
sly and cunning is the root,
its arms like ropes.

Gyökér karján féreg alszik,
gyökér lábán féreg ül,
a világ megférgesül.

In the root's arms a worm sleeps,
in the root's lap a worm sits,
the world is infested with worms.

De a gyökér tovább él lent,
nem érdekli a világ,
csak a lombbal teli ág.

But the root lives on below,
not interested in the world,
only the leaf-laden branch.

Azt csodálja, táplálgatja,
küld néki jó ízeket,
édes, régi ízeket.

This it cherishes, nurtures,
sends it good tastes,
sweet, old tastes.

Gyökér vagyok magam is most,
férgek között élek én,
ott készül e költemény.

Root I am myself too now,
down among the worms I live,
there I write this poem.

Virág voltam, gyökér lettem,
súlyos, sötét föld felettem,
sorsom elvégeztetett,
fűrész sír fejem felett.

A flower I was, a root I became,
heavy, dark earth above me,
my fate is decided,
a saw wails above my head.

3. *Százszorszépet ont a rét (The Field Pours Out Daisies)*
Sándor Weöres (1913–89)

Százszorszépet ont a rét,
ág pezsdül. Tavasz van.
Te csak hült-merev maradsz,
kő a kurta gazban.

The field pours out daisies,
branch froths. Spring is here.
But you stay frozen stiff,
stone in the short weeds.

Nimfa táncol, faun kering,
újul száz alakban.
Vén kő nézi hallgatag,
örök kárhozatban.

Nymphs dance, fauns circle,
fainting in a hundred shapes.
Old stone watches on
in eternal perdition.

A virágé bús öröm:
egy évig ha bírja.
A kőé az istenek
halhatatlan kínja.

For the flower, sad joy:
a year, if it has the strength.
For the stone, the gods'
immortal pain.

4. *Az ág (The Branch)*
Sándor Weöres

Kihajló ág,
zöld homály,

Bending branch,
green shade,

szememben
látomásom,
lomb közt
érzésem,

in my eyes
the sight,
in the leaves
my feeling,

külső és belső
egyetlen percben
összeforr.

outside and inside
in a single moment
fuse.

5. *Galagonya (Haw Berry)*
Sándor Weöres

Őszi éjjel	On autumn nights
izzik a galagonya	glows the haw berry's
izzik a galagonya	glows the haw berry's
ruhája.	dress.
Zúg a tüske,	Blustering the thorns,
szél szalad ide-oda,	winds skitter back and forth,
reszket a galagonya	shivering the haw berry
magába.	all alone.
Hogyha a Hold rá	If the Moon should
fátylat ereszt:	lower her veil:
lánnyá válik,	berry turns girl,
sírni kezd.	starts to wail.
Őszi éjjel	On autumn nights
izzik a galagonya	glows the haw berry's
izzik a galagonya	glows the haw berry's
ruhája.	dress.

6. *Hosszú a virágfüzér (Long Is the Flower Garland)*
Sándor Weöres

Hosszú a virágfüzér,	Long is the flower garland,
kéztől kézig ér,	it stretches from hand to hand,
valamennyi kézen át	through all the hands
kezdettől végig ér.	from beginning to end.
Átlépünk a hegyen,	We cross over the mountains,
fogjátok a füzért	take the garland
mindkét hegyoldalon.	to both sides of the mountains.
Lejtünk a tengeren,	We go down to the sea,
fogjátok a füzért	take the garland
mindkét partoldalon.	to both shores.
Szállunk az égen át	We fly through the sky,
a csillagok között	among the stars,
hosszú a virágfüzér,	long is the flower garland,
kéztől kézig ér,	it stretches from hand to hand,
valamennyi kézen át	through all the hands
kezdettől végig ér.	from beginning to end.

7. *Erdő sűrüjében (In the Thick of the Forest)*
Ottó Orbán (1936–2002)

Jó reggel kimentem,	Early in the morning I went out,
az erdőbe mentem,	I went to the forest,
erdő sűrüjében	in the thick of the forest
gallyat szedegettem,	I gathered kindling,
virágom, virágom,	my flower, my flower,
kertem ékessége,	my garden's jewel,
szívem fényessége,	my heart's brightness,
gyönyörűsége.	its delight.
Az erdőbe mentem,	I went to the forest,
gallyat szedegettem,	I gathered kindling,
erdő sűrüjében	in the thick of the forest
gyöngyen lépegettem,	I walked on pearls,
virágom, virágom,	my flower, my flower,
kertem ékessége,	my garden's jewel,
szívem fényessége,	my heart's brightness,
gyönyörűsége.	its delight.
Gallyat szedegettem,	I gathered kindling,
gyöngyen lépegettem,	I walked on pearls,
feneketlen kútba,	into a bottomless well,
szerelembe estem,	I fell into love,
virágom, virágom,	my flower, my flower,
kertem ékessége,	my garden's jewel,
szívem sötétsége,	my heart's darkness,
keserűsége.	its bitterness.

Translations by Thomas Adès

Left to right: Conductor Zoltán Peskó, Márta Kurtág, and György Kurtág

Concentrated Emotions, Allusions upon Allusions: The Unity of Composing and Teaching in the Work of György Kurtág

As a chamber music teacher, György Kurtág is famous for spending hours on just a few measures of music—as if one may never do full justice to the expressive character of each and every note, or achieve the right degree of connection and separation among the phrases. As one former student put it, every accent, every single nuance must be "weighed on a pharmacy scale." To study with Kurtág is to commit to a rigorous reflection on each note, which also means a rigorous examination of oneself. For him, playing is inseparable from being; one cannot hope to express what the composer wrote without identifying with the music on the deepest level, and without being 150 percent focused on every detail. At the same time, Kurtág insists that nothing should ever be forced or pushed (as in "you shouldn't *want* to do it, you should just let it happen"—my paraphrase). The student has to be completely spontaneous and completely controlled at the same time.

The same duality of spontaneity and total control informs Kurtág's way of composing as well. He has often said that if he knows too much about how a piece will go, he cannot write it. Foundational gestures—tender, wild, soothing, angry, and many more—are often at the root of his music, constantly influenced by, and in turn influencing, an exceptional intellect that shapes those gestures and gives them form.

One particularly fascinating aspect of Kurtág's approach is revealed in the wide-ranging associative networks that inform both his compositions and his teaching. Working on some pieces from his monumental piano series *Játékok* (*Games*) during a recent coaching session available on YouTube, the 99-year-old master brought up, in the space of a few minutes, Béla Bartók's Piano Concerto No. 3, the night watchman's horn from Richard Wagner's *Die Meistersinger,* Leoš Janáček, the habanera, and a mournful Hungarian folk song, as analogues to specific moments in the pieces.

Such associations, familiar to anyone who has ever witnessed a Kurtág master class, also appear in his compositions, where they are sometimes indicated in the score. Between 1993 and 1998, Kurtág composed a vocal cycle for baritone, string trio, and percussion, after texts by Samuel Beckett and the 18th-century French writer Sébastien-Roch Nicolas Chamfort, under the title *...pas à pas...-nulle part* (Op. 36). One of the short poems in the cycle, "Inventaire" ("inventory"), has the surprising tempo marking of "Tempo di Pimen," followed by the Italian words *calmo, scorrevole, molto uguale* ("calm, flowing, very even"). A footnote references the character Pimen from Modest Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov*, but the connection is not further explained. Only when we remember the scene from the opera—where the learned monk Pimen writes his chronicle in his cell—do we realize the close connection between Mussorgsky's "calm, flowing, very even" viola part and Kurtág's vocal line in Op. 36.

When I first came across this piece and saw the "Tempo di Pimen" designation, an old memory came back to me. When I was a first-year conservatory student in 1974, my classmates and I were singing Heinrich Schütz's *St. Matthew Passion* in Kurtág's class. The opening movement contains the words: "wie es beschreibet der heilige Evangeliste Matthaeus" ("as St. Matthew the Evangelist describes it"). Kurtág told us to think of the Pimen scene when singing this passage; and in fact, the word *beschreibet* (describes) is set to the same oscillating melisma (sung "re-mi-re-mi") found in Mussorgsky's work and also in the Kurtág piece, written two decades after that memorable class!

To Kurtág, this melisma represented the hand of the *Passion* scribe, and, in class, he demonstrated it by drawing letters in the air, to teach us how to shape the phrase in question. Of course, the "inventory" in Beckett's text also involves writing—at least that's how Kurtág chose to represent it. This vignette demonstrates the chains of associations that exist in Kurtág's mind, spanning centuries of music history and decades of his own life as a composer and teacher.

Another complex set of associations appears in the "Furious Chorale" from *Játékok,* book 4, a four-hand piece Kurtág and his wife, Márta, frequently performed at their recitals. The "furious" sharp accents in the *secondo* part contrast with the long, connected notes in the *primo*. The latter form a kind of "chorale" because their slow motion in equal note values are somewhat similar to the J. S. Bach chorales that have always been a fundamental musical reference for Kurtág: his four-hand transcriptions of Bach chorales were frequently included in the recitals he gave with Márta. While Bach's chorales do not always consist of strictly equal note values, their symmetrical structure projects a certain stability and equilibrium that inspired some of Kurtág's slow-moving passages. And this equilibrium is precisely what is disrupted, in the "Furious Chorale," by the outbursts of the second pianist.

Speaking of chorales, I am reminded that as a teenager, I studied composition with a teacher who was an early associate of Kurtág's; in fact, it was this teacher, István Máriássy, who first mentioned Kurtág's name to me in the late 1960s. The very first assignment that Mr. Máriássy gave me was to write a "chorale," that is, a melody moving in equal note values where the ascending and descending intervals, as well as the cadential resting points, were well balanced and logically ordered. The idea of the "chorale," therefore, doesn't necessarily refer to a Lutheran church hymn: It can stand for any melody that resembles a chorale. Such "pseudo-chorales" are not rare in Kurtág's music, from the "Little Chorale" (*Játékok*, book 1) to the orchestral postlude (not explicitly marked "chorale") of the opera *Fin de partie*.

But the idea of the chorale didn't always come to Kurtág directly from Bach. It could also come from Bach through the intermediary of Bartók, whose music Kurtág has frequently called his "mother tongue." Bartók, too, was fond of such slow-moving, chorale-like melodies, as in the second movements of both his Second and Third Piano Concertos, or in the second movement of the Concerto for Orchestra. Bartók was also a model in contrasting a continuous melody with "interruptions" of various kinds, as in the "Melody with Interruptions" (*Mikrokosmos*, volume 3) or "Melody in the Mist" (volume 4).

Toward the end of Kurtág's "Furious Chorale," a funny little melody appears out of nowhere, played by the first pianist in parallel major sevenths. When the melody is repeated, it is abruptly cut off before the last note. The passage recalls the last movement of Bartók's String Quartet No. 5, in which, just before the end, an intentionally banal melody appears, and is repeated a half-step higher, creating semitone clashes similar to those in the Kurtág piece.

Kurtág is intimately familiar with the entire history of Western music from Gregorian chant to the present, and this immense repertoire is constantly present in his mind. To think of the above-mentioned references as influences would not be entirely correct, because they don't involve borrowing any specific elements of style; at no point does Kurtág's music sound like anyone else's. Yet they represent an important aspect of his thinking. They connect him to music history—the history in which he is rooted, and to which he has made such fundamental contributions in the course of his long life. And he imparts that history to everyone who comes into contact with him, whether as a listener or as a student.

Peter Laki, *Visiting Associate Professor of Music Emeritus*

RECOLLECTIONS

BENJAMIN APPL
Microcosm Music

Meeting *Gyuri bácsi* (Uncle George), as György Kurtág is affectionately called throughout Hungary, and working with him intensively over many years has been such a wonderful gift. He has shaped me as a musician and person as perhaps no other has done.

I was contacted by the Konzerthaus Dortmund in 2018, as they were planning a festival to honor Kurtág in 2020. His personal request was to have his *Hölderlin-Gesänge* performed as part of that celebration, and in keeping with Kurtág's high standards (which he expects both of himself and others), various singers were suggested to him over several months to sing these special songs. He finally decided on me.

I had already heard that Kurtág's extremely detailed and intense way of working had driven many musicians to despair. He always expects that performers approach his music critically, and that their performances are delivered to the very highest standards within each artist's abilities.

The preparations for our first collaboration were long, and the musical demands were high: the vocal range, the tonal line, and, not least, the difficult-to-understand texts. Nervous, and with these weighty considerations in mind, I met the composer and his wife, Márta, on May 7, 2019, at the Budapest Music Center. Shielded from today's fast-moving music industry, Kurtág lives at the center, in a small apartment that he has hardly left in years. He immediately asked me to perform the six songs, most of them unaccompanied. Kurtág's wife ended the long, thoughtful silence that followed with a short remark in Hungarian. He then looked me in the eye and said: "Márta says you are our person."

Kurtág said this at the beginning of our collaboration. Even though the path was often hard and I frequently questioned many existential matters during the process, over the years I developed a wonderful friendship with this man who is almost 60 years my senior. To this day, my desire to perfect the *Hölderlin-Gesänge* is not yet satisfied and will remain my life's work. Kurtág and I will work for hours on a single bar, and he often interrupts when I breathe in before singing a single note. The highest demands are expected of my concentration and of my own intellectual understanding, regularly taken to the point of complete mental and physical exhaustion. While I have to repeatedly request breaks, the composer, now over 90 years old, seems to have infinite reserves of energy and unrelenting creative vision.

Kurtág opened up new worlds to me: He taught me to redefine myself as a musician and interpreter, and to question my entrenched views about God, music, and the world. To forestall any hasty decisions on my part, Kurtág gave me tools that allowed me to formulate questions differently or even ask different questions, which expands the spectrum of possible answers.

I was lucky enough to witness him composing while he was waging intense inner battles over the smallest changes in the score. During this process, Márta—herself an excellent pianist—was his most steadfast support, but also his most critical authority. He is convinced that she understood his compositions better than he did himself. Only after she gave him consent did Kurtág allow the publication of a new work. I remember well when, shortly after her death in October 2019, he sat in silence at the piano and simply listened, in order to try and sense her judgment inside himself. He waited for her voice.

Kurtág was born in Transylvania in 1926. In 1946 he moved to Budapest to study at the Liszt Academy of Music, where he met Márta. After the cruel years spanning 1934 to 1945, many young people, believing that they could change the world and themselves, were seeking alternatives to Nazism. In the early 1950s, Kurtág took a liking to the new communist order in Hungary, but the brutal crushing of the popular uprising in 1956 by the Red Army destroyed this ideal and plunged him into a deep personal and creative crisis.

In his search for himself, he began studying with Olivier Messiaen and Darius Milhaud in Paris in 1957. Upon the advice of art therapist Marianne Stein, he decided to concentrate on only the essential matters in life, thus leading him to radically reduce complications and distractions. In doing so, he found new strength and began to write small, short pieces. Completely withdrawing into himself enabled Kurtág to concentrate his energies entirely within, eventually finding one of the most idiosyncratic tonal languages of modern times. He brought the spirit of the times from Paris to his homeland, thus shaping music in an otherwise isolated Hungary like no other composer. He did not achieve his international breakthrough until 1981 in Paris, when he was 55, yet today Kurtág is one of the most outstanding musicians of our time and one of the great classical composers.

It is impossible to make small talk with someone who is the master of eloquent silence. Kurtág is firmly convinced that less is often more. During long pauses for thought, he seeks to choose precise words in the most succinct way possible. The same applies to his intense and concentrated compositions, which open up entire universes to us via just a few notes.

He calls his creative work "happiness." Collaboration with other musicians is also essential for Kurtág, as this process allows him to question his compositions anew and understand them better. "Let's start again from the beginning" and "maybe" are expressions he uses often. In his modesty, he firmly believes that a composition follows its own rules and is only successful when the composition's commands happen, not when the composer gets what he wants. Music only comes into being when it wants to come to life.

After Márta's death, Kurtág got the idea to combine the Hölderlin songs with art songs from the German Romantic period, which were also pieces important to Márta. I am extremely pleased that we were able to win over two wonderful pianists, Kurtág's longtime friend Pierre-Laurent Aimard and James Baillieu, to join us for our recording.

In 12 long days, over 1,300 recording takes, and countless repetitions, we recorded an album that contains many exciting new works. Kurtág was present at all of our recording sessions and acted as producer throughout. Our album, *Lines of Life*, and the additional German interview with Kurtág, is intended to provide an insight into the infinite cosmos of the shy procrastinator, strict self-critic, tentative seeker, introverted questioner, unpretentious intellectual, brilliant composer, and extraordinary person György Kurtág. The recording reflects his view of 19th-, 20th-, and 21st-century works, looking at them through the magnifying glass of the great contemporary composer. To this day, Kurtág follows the ideal of one of his greatest role models, Béla Bártok: to remain true to oneself. He does not write music to please or to be liked. He only seeks truth.

I am deeply grateful to György and Márta Kurtág. One rarely meets such unique people in life. Kurtág showed me the true meaning of being a musician. Through our deep relationship with music, he gave me a greater understanding of what it means to be who I am today: what an enormous musical, and perhaps more important, human gift!

GERGELY FAZEKAS
Kurtág's Teaching

For nearly 20 years, between 1967 and 1986, György Kurtág spent most Fridays and Saturdays, from early September to late May, doing essentially the same thing. In the morning, he entered the Art Nouveau building of the Budapest Academy of Music through the side entrance, walked up the stairs to the second floor, and taught chamber music in Room 23 until evening, with only a short break. Teaching was Kurtág's raison d'être. It still is.

"My natural state is to sit and watch," Kurtág said in an interview. "Márta asks me what I am thinking about. Nothing. I do not usually think. I like teaching because it forces me to think. A mechanism is triggered, and I learn very interesting things about my own thoughts." Teaching is an indispensable aid for him in composing, and perhaps even more than that: It is an aid to life. As I write, Kurtág is two months away from his 100th birthday, yet he still gives master classes. He teaches both his own works and the classics, and anyone who has had the opportunity to work with him—whether stars of classical music such as Pierre-Laurent Aimard, Steven Isserlis, and Benjamin Appl, or young musicians—remembers these encounters opening new doors for them to the musical works in question. To music in general.

However, I do not want to discuss here what or how Kurtág teaches music, but rather what I have learned from Kurtág— myself as a musicologist, or, perhaps more accurately, as a human being. Not directly from him, but through my engagement with his music: listening to it, playing it, analyzing it, and reflecting on it.

In the summer of 2025 , I had the opportunity to collect and organize Kurtág's manuscripts in his study. Ten years before, Kurtág and his wife, Márta, had moved back to Hungary after living in Saint-André-de-Cubzac, a small town in southern France near

Bordeaux. From the late 1980s, he and Márta had lived in Vienna, Berlin, Amsterdam, and Paris. Since 2015, Kurtág has lived in a guest apartment on the upper floor of the Budapest Music Center, a contemporary music and jazz venue in the heart of the Hungarian capital.

He lost his wife, Márta, in 2019 after 72 years of marriage. She was not only his partner, the mother of their son, György Kurtág Jr., and his piano partner in their magical four-handed concerts, but also an indispensable source of inspiration and a spiritual driving force in the creation of his works. In a 2009 conversation, Kurtág referred to her as "my projected superego," and in a 2023 interview with British newspaper *The Guardian*, he said that she was his "muse-gendarme."

Márta was the first listener, critic, and editor of Kurtág's works. She organized the sketches, drafts, and fair copies into folders, supervised the creation of proper photocopies, and ensured they eventually reached the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, Switzerland, where the manuscripts of important 20th- and 21st-century composers are preserved in storage rooms at the ideal temperature and humidity, six stories deep in a rocky hill above the Rhine River. Kurtág's handwritten scores are preserved there alongside original compositions by Igor Stravinsky, Anton Webern, Pierre Boulez, Helmut Lachenmann, György Ligeti, Péter Eötvös, and many others.

Since Márta's death, most of the manuscripts have followed their usual path: They were sent to the publisher, Editio Musica Budapest, and then to the Sacher Foundation. However, many drafts, finished works, and fragments remained locked in folders on shelves and in drawers in Kurtág's small study, where an upright piano and a harmonium face bookshelves filled with books, scores, and CDs. They waited for someone to look through them. Or perhaps they were not waiting for anyone at all. In an interview for the documentary film *Kurtág Fragments* (in which I participated as a music consultant), we asked Kurtág what he thought about the future of his work. He replied: "Will they remember me or forget me? I do not know. Maybe they will remember me. Maybe they will forget me. It would be best if they forgot me and then rediscovered me. But it does not matter."

The future is not particularly important to Kurtág. The key message of his master classes is that the success of the concert does not really matter, though it is fine if it goes well. What matters is the actual work on the music—whether the musician has seen through the musical logic of the piece; understood the relationships between motifs, chords, and the right forms of expression for the different musical gestures; and grasped the tiny slice of reality the piece reflects. For Kurtág, work is "labor" in both senses of the word: it requires great effort and is a creative act, resulting in bringing something into being. In another interview for the documentary, he said: "In teaching, we investigate: What is reality? What is behind things? What remains unspoken but is nevertheless present? The moment you discover something is creation itself."

When I began looking through the contents of the folders in Kurtág's study, I was amazed by how many manuscript pages he has created since 2019. No matter how little music he publishes, he composes constantly, writing musical notes on paper day after day. Often, these pages do not become finished works, or they undergo countless changes, entailing hundreds more pages of music before becoming publishable compositions.

Composing for Kurtág is an extremely difficult, lengthy, and painful process. It always has been. During his long life, he has experienced creative crises lasting several months—or even years—on quite a few occasions, although a sense of "crisis" is probably also a defining experience of his productive periods. Few composers in the history of Western music have viewed their own creative activity with as much intense self-criticism as Kurtág.

Among the manuscripts in his study, I found the draft of an unfinished string quartet. On one of the pages, there are only two bars of music written at the top left, and even these bars are incomplete. The second violin and viola parts consist of just a few scattered notes. It is as if Kurtág became stuck in the process of composition. Next to this unfinished sketch, on the right side of the page, are two short questions written in Kurtág's beautiful, calligraphic handwriting: "Elvesztettem a tehetségem? Vagy nem is volt?" ("Have I lost my talent? Or did I never have any?")

Since Kurtág dates all his manuscripts, we know this sketch was written in spring 2019. This means that György Kurtág, one of the most influential composers of the second half of the 20th century—subject of scholarly articles, monographs, journal issues, festival booklets; a chamber music coach sought out by the world's greatest musicians for master classes—questioned, at the age of 93, his own musical talent, that is, his innermost essence.

Self-criticism appears to be Kurtág's driving force in his work, and work seems to be his driving force in life. It is fascinating to see how tirelessly and carefully Kurtág shapes even his smallest musical pieces. In the mid-1970s, Kurtág began composing piano pieces for pedagogical purposes, which led to the publication of the first four books of the series *Játékok* (*Games*) in 1979. Since the early 1980s, the series has taken the form of a personal diary, which means that Kurtág's oeuvre has followed two paths from that time onward. While composing works that are great in every sense—multimovement vocal cycles, large-scale orchestral pieces, and, since 2010, operas—he has continued to write small, personal piano pieces. Most of these pieces, which appeared in later volumes of *Games* (volume 11 is scheduled for this year), are dedicated to acquaintances, colleagues, friends, and family members, sometimes evoking the memories of those who passed away not long before. In the 19th century, the term "Albumblatt" was used for this type of piano music.

Among the manuscripts in Kurtág's study, I found several small works, some of which may never be published. One example, composed between January 2 and 4, 2024, is a brief piece of only a few bars: two long, densely written, but soft chords in the piano's middle register, answered by two shorter chords that span almost the entire range of the instrument, and a final long chord in the middle, combining elements of the first two chords. That's all. "Orbán Juli in memoriam" is the title of the piece, written in memory of Júlia Orbán (1939–2024), widow of renowned Hungarian poet

Ottó Orbán (1936–2002), Kurtág's late friend. In one of the folders were seven pages of this brief composition; each page contained a slightly different version, all dated between January 2 and January 4 (Júlia Orbán died on January 1). It is hard—indeed, impossible—to determine which is the final version, and perhaps that is not important. I do not think Kurtág is interested in whether the piece is published or performed. It is a personal message to the other world. Two things seem to matter for Kurtág: whether the message reaches the addressee and whether it fills its small but aesthetically wide space in a perfectly seamless way.

As the seven-page draft shows, Kurtág devoted as much effort to this small piece—a work written without any expectation of publication or public performance—as he did to any of his other music. Greatness is not a matter of size.

I think the biggest lesson I learned from Kurtág is the attentiveness and care he gives to even the smallest musical pieces and to every note, both as a composer and as a chamber music coach. In an era flooded with superficial short videos and social media posts created as quickly as they are consumed, Kurtág's perspective offers us a filter, one that prevents things without value from seeping through to us.

Life is too brief; even a life of 100 years is too short to waste on superficial questions. It is only worth engaging with what mattered to Samuel Beckett, Friedrich Hölderlin, Anna Akhmatova, Franz Kafka, Heraclitus, János Pilinszky, Dezső Tandori, Attila József, and the other poets and writers who define Kurtág's mindset and vocal music: questions about the nature of love, hatred, sin, and purity; how we relate to pain and pleasure; how we connect with what is beautiful and what is ugly; and how we live our lives. Kurtág does not offer models; he does not tell us what the right path is. There may be no such path. As Franz Kafka states (in a text Kurtág set to music in 1985 in the longest movement of *Kafka Fragments*, considered by many the peak of his output): "The true path leads along a rope stretched not high above, but directly above the ground. It is as if it serves more to make us stumble than to walk on it."

KONSTANTIA GOURZI
On Kurtág

I met György Kurtág in Berlin in the early 1990s. He was a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and I was studying composition and conducting at the Hochschule der Künste (now UdK Berlin). Pit Riegelbauer, double bassist of the Berlin Philharmonic and member of the Scharoun Ensemble—I knew him from the orchestra's rehearsals, where I was very often a guest listener—called me one day and asked whether I would be interested in attending a rehearsal where they would be playing Kurtág's music. The composer himself would be present.

Already, during that rehearsal, a strong sense of mutual sympathy developed between Kurtág and me. We began to meet frequently, marking the beginning of our long artistic relationship. At first, we read ancient Greek together, and, later, we turned to music—discussing various composers and analyzing their works.

I worked with him almost daily for six years. During that time, I served as his assistant for his first orchestral work, *Stele*, and other compositions. I was allowed to accompany him to every rehearsal and express my musical thoughts. With him and Márta, I developed a close, intense, and profoundly rich relationship—both musical and individual. Drafts of all the new pieces he composed at the time arrived at my home by fax, day and night.

For me, he was not only the savior of short-form compositions, but also the proof that such pieces, which I also composed, required even more intense engagement with oneself and with the need for personal, powerful expression.

Through Kurtág and his music, I came to know myself. I developed confidence in who I am, and I experienced wonderful performances and met remarkable people. One cannot imitate Kurtág's music—it remains unique and utterly authentic to the very last note. He and his music are an immense gift to the musical world, for which I am deeply grateful.

I am very happy that, at the age of 100, he is still mentally so fit—and that he and his music are being celebrated.

MARIA HUSMANN
Note by Note

I have known György Kurtág for over 30 years. I happened to attend a performance of his *Kafka Fragments* at the Berlin Philharmonic. The music overwhelmed me. Shortly afterward, Elmar Weingarten, then artistic director of the philharmonic, asked me if I could take over *Kafka Fragments* with András Keller on short notice and, without hesitation, I agreed.

I met Kurtág in 1993 at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, where he was a fellow from 1993 to 1995 and from 1998 to 1999. We started working together and immediately felt a connection! Since then, Kurtág and his music have influenced and accompanied my professional life, indeed my whole life. He completely changed my understanding of music. I had the sense that he was impossibly close to knowing what constitutes the essence of music—a feeling I'd hardly ever experienced with anyone else before.

This congruence has lasted throughout the decades. We were able to work so closely together on his second opera—*Die Stechardin,* for solo soprano and large orchestra (premiered February 20, 2026)—over these last three years because we speak the same musical language.

Kurtág is so incredibly precise from one note to the next! Many musicians cannot cope with his sensitivity and unrelenting intensity. Even before you have sung a single note, just as you inhale, Kurtág might say: "No, no, that's not right, try again." It can take half an hour before you hit the right note. Few people can endure that. People often say that working with him is incredibly difficult because he is so strict.

But we understand each other very well. Our relationship is very special—a similar musical sensibility, a kind of soulmate connection. It comes from our same feeling of what music can be: what happens in a note, what happens between two notes. Having this awareness of the smallest element is crucial. Mindfulness for every note from its beginning to its end, note by note. And that's a lot to be mindful of.

The amazing thing is—he's always right. He's just always right. No matter how unpleasant what he says may be, you know it's true. And that's what makes the work so exciting, so thrilling, so existential. Of course it's hard; I'm exhausted after a rehearsal. But it's brilliant. And to be able to experience that, to be able to feel that, is the greatest gift. You have to be able to accept it. You have to be up to it.

Kurtág is rarely satisfied. He almost never gives praise, but that's not the point. The point is always about the music: When does it come together? When does it not?

Translation by Tobias Schmid

STEVEN ISSERLIS
Kurtág and *Signs, Games & Messages*

I have known György Kurtág for—I would estimate—some 40 years now; it has been a life-changing friendship. I well remember our first meeting, which was at the International Musicians Seminar in Cornwall: I was sitting in the dining hall there when a man I'd never encountered before—with grizzled hair and an unusually fervent countenance—entered, came up to me, and (with barely any introduction) started talking about my pizzicato playing in a performance he'd heard of Schubert's String Quintet some years earlier, in which I'd taken the second cello part. This man was, needless to say, György Kurtág—accompanied then, as almost invariably during those years, by his wife, Márta, who hung back somewhat, but didn't miss a word. I was of course immediately struck by Kurtag's magnetic intensity, his fierce passion for music, and his unique way of speaking English—punctuated by frequent utterances of "er-er-er." (Many years later, he would tell me, "Stuttering is my natural mode of expression.") I was soon caught up in the irresistible world that he and Márta created. I adored them both! They simply *embodied*—he still embodies—music. I had never met anyone to whom each note mattered so much. (In fact, they both reminded me of what a friend of mine once said about Beethoven: "He didn't know the meaning of the words 'it doesn't matter.'")

Whether it was during the first year of our friendship or after it I don't know, but at some point Kurtág handed me one of his pieces for solo cello, "Gerard de Nerval," and asked me to play it for him a few days later (or perhaps one day later—I forget the exact details). Knowing nothing about his music apart from its sterling reputation, I looked at the short piece; managed, after a fashion, to learn the notes; thought that it seemed poetic—it was based on a poem, in fact—and then, in a little room, played it through for him and Márta. That was when I understood (by no means for the last time) that I had understood absolutely nothing! He took me through the piece note by note, explaining, singing, demanding, creating visions, and weaving a spell of emotional profundity that was quite new to me. It was a revelation.

From that time, I played for him as often as possible. (Also for Márta, who was almost always at his side, making comments as probing and helpful as his; her knowledge and understanding of his music was astonishing. They really were "as one.") For the most part, we worked on Kurtág's own pieces, though very occasionally I've gotten him to coach me on works by others (as well as gotten his reactions when he's come to a concert of mine). The revelations continued! Playing for him is transformative in every way. His imagination is boundless; he will produce startling, always unexpected images (or point out connections, musical or extramusical) that illuminate his meaning perfectly. For instance, at the beginning of his short work for muted solo cello entitled "Schatten" (Shadows)—a scurrying, dark piece with frequent abrupt silences—he told me to think of the opening scene of *Hamlet*, where the ghost of Hamlet's father flits almost imperceptibly across the castle battlements, impossible to pinpoint. ("'Tis here" —"'Tis here"—"'Tis gone.") That picture really helped me capture the unsettled, unsettling atmosphere of the music. Or he will describe silence; in my notes on "Schatten," I see a quote from our session: "Rests represent motifs you don't play; only the essential is told." (All the pieces on which I have worked with him are covered in lesson notes! I like to preserve everything I can, partly for my own use; partly for the pleasure of remembering; and partly because it may prove helpful for future Kurtág interpreters.)

Animals often figure into his teaching. I have notes telling myself to play "like the neighing of a horse," "like a snake," or like "a cat's meow." Or, he will point out veiled references—from Carlo Gesualdo, for instance, or Beethoven's *Grosse Fugue*. His music always has a tonal center, so he will sometimes tell me to bring out the color of a certain key. And he will always—after some searching ("How to tell you?")—find a new way to describe the phrase on which we are working. He even helps me technically: a gesture in the air to illustrate the sort of articulation he has in mind, and I will find myself using the bow in an entirely new way.

To say that playing for him is an intense experience would be an understatement. Lessons can go on for a long time yet, strangely, I've never felt tired at the end of one of these sessions. He gives you the feeling that you are working together toward the same end, searching in partnership for a reading of the music that makes sense, that reflects the formidable vision behind the notes. I find it hard to describe the satisfaction I feel when *he* is finally satisfied—perhaps it's something akin to the sensation a mountaineer experiences when he or she reaches a seemingly unassailable peak! Though, of course, I then have a fresh challenge: to go home and try to reach that same peak myself, without the guidance that Kurtág provides. He always insists, when our work together has reached a natural conclusion, that the piece is now mine and that it is henceforth up to me to play as I feel; but the feeling of responsibility, of doing his music justice, is quite palpable whether he's present or not.

Anyone who attended one of the few concerts given by Kurtág and Márta will have witnessed something extraordinary. (Fortunately, several videos are available on YouTube.) I was lucky enough to catch their unforgettable last recital, at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. There they sat, close together on a wooden bench, their backs to the audience, playing on a specially softened upright piano that was amplified by their son, György Kurtág Jr., and weaving a magical spell, alternating seamlessly between J. S. Bach arrangements and original Kurtág. We were transported, and it was especially moving to see Kurtág and Márta's bond played out in music. They were inseparable, an indissoluble entity—not that their relationship was always without tension! My favorite story about the two of them is from a day on which they were rehearsing for a concert in Cornwall. (I wasn't at this rehearsal, alas, but I heard about it.) At one point, Kurtág did one of his signature gestures, his arm descending through the air infinitely slowly to land on a note and produce an almost inaudible pianissimo. Márta turned and snapped at him: "Why are you playing so aggressively today?"' A different world, indeed.

Nowadays, at age 99, Kurtág, despite losing Márta some years ago, is—touch wood—remarkably active, continuing to compose ceaselessly and teaching regularly. While he is physically frail in some ways, his mind is alert as ever. On one of my most recent visits to him in Budapest, he informed me that he was free only until 7:30. "And what are you doing at 7:30?" I asked. "I have a Latin lesson." Ah, yes—of course. In fact, the latest of the four pieces he's written for me (so far!) is based on a Latin text. "Circumdederunt" for solo cello, composed in memory of our beloved mutual friend Rita Wagner (Rados), is a characteristically powerful testament—sparsely textured and full of intense grief, but tempered with hope. The first draft he sent was entirely in the key of F major; but then came a new version, with the faster middle section now transposed to F-sharp—quite a jarring change. During my first lesson on the piece, he urged me to play it more violently (or, in his words, "more stinking"). I had to play it many times before I was able to convey the passion he was demanding. I couldn't keep up with his energy! But, of course, his instruction made absolute sense as it threw into sharp relief the piece's radiantly peaceful ending.

To say that Kurtág is, putting it mildly, an extraordinary man and musician is probably redundant; but he is also extremely loveable. Living now on the top floor of the Budapest Music Center, he is adored by everyone—even the building staff refer to him as "Uncle Gyuri"! On the lower floors of the building are two concert halls; occasionally, he will take the lift downstairs to attend a performance, emerging in his wheelchair from the elevator doors, to be treated as a living deity. His presence ensures that musicians will give absolutely all that they have in them—everyone is so desperate to earn his approval!

Long may this great man and musician prosper. My opening to any conversation with him is, quite naturally, to ask him how he is. I always wait breathlessly for the answer, ardently hoping that I will hear the familiar words: "Thank you. Working." Then I can breathe a sigh of relief—I know that all is well on Planet Kurtág.

DÉNES NAGY

Kurtág's Silence

On the filming of the documentary Kurtág Fragments

Many people have asked me: What is this film about?
Kurtág's face, I replied.
The face of a man who is nearly a hundred years old.
A face that exists between worlds.
A face beyond pride, beyond the urge to conform, beyond the need to respond quickly and wittily. A face that is, at the same time, present, alive, and full of emotion. A gaze that reveals the tangible joys and burdens of life. Seemingly unmoving yet hiding secrets within. Like a well that leads down into unknown depths. The film takes us down this well, into the depths of György Kurtág's inner world. We didn't want to illuminate this world, we just wanted to enter it, and we wanted the viewer to enter it too.

During filming, we recorded many hours of conversation with Kurtág. I began preparing for each conversation several days in advance. I wrote down clever questions and interesting topics. I remember our first meeting well. Just before entering his apartment, I nervously clutched my notes, repeatedly rereading the questions I had written down. I quickly removed some at the last minute and moved others from the end of the list to the beginning. We worked with a small film crew; besides me, only four other people were present. We entered Kurtág's home with reverence, almost tiptoeing, like people entering the sanctuary of an unfamiliar religion, unsure how to behave. In the apartment where Kurtág lives, none of the windows are at eye level; all you see are the walls. The light comes from above, through two high skylights in the flat roof.

I sat on a chair opposite Kurtág, while he, looking up from his armchair, gazed quietly and for a long time at the clouds floating in the sky. We waited in silence as the cameraman assembled the tripod and camera with quiet movements, and the sound engineer set up the microphones. When everyone was ready, my colleagues nodded to indicate that we could start. There was a long silence, and after a short while, I allowed myself a cautious, signal-like cough. Kurtág took his eyes off the clouds and looked at me.

Everyone in his immediate circle calls him "Uncle Gyuri," so I adopted this form of address as well. "How are you, Uncle Gyuri?" I greeted him. I thought that after this polite introductory question, I would get to the point and discuss the topics I had prepared. However, instead of responding quickly, Kurtág sank deep into thought at this everyday question. Minutes passed. They seemed endless. There was a palpable, tense silence. I could hear the cameraman breathing more and more nervously behind me, and I sensed through his increasingly frequent sighs that he was trying to tell me to break the awkward silence. For some reason, I resisted the temptation. We waited. The sound engineer also glanced at me furtively from time to time, holding the microphone boom a few inches above Kurtág's head with tense, stiff arms. I sensed despair in his uncertain gaze, as if he were silently asking me, "What the hell is going on?" Meanwhile, I watched Kurtág's silent face and felt he was somewhere else.

Finally, he looked up and broke the silence.
As he began to speak, everyone breathed a sigh of relief.
From then on, I had two tasks: to listen and to concentrate. The questions I had prepared in advance lost their meaning.

Kurtág did not speak in complete, planned sentences but often in fragments of thoughts. His speech was broken by sudden pauses, as if he were searching for something, trying with great intensity to grasp what he could only partially articulate and convey. When the camera stopped rolling, we shook hands and exchanged polite goodbyes. The crew quietly dismantled the equipment, and we left the apartment. Kurtág remained seated in his armchair, in the same position as when we had started filming a few hours earlier.

This happened many times. For three years, we followed Kurtág's daily life with our camera, accompanying him in the solitude of composing, during endless rehearsals with various musicians, recording sessions, and at social and family events. We also recorded several similarly lengthy and fragmented conversations with him. During the 70 days of filming, he never once asked my name, who I was, where I came from, whether I had a family, what I thought about anything, what interested me, or what I liked to do in my free time. I watched and listened, curious and persistent. We did not become friends or even acquaintances. Nevertheless, I felt I gained a great deal from him, that these encounters were very personal after all. I felt that someone was opening up and revealing himself. Something in his gaze was always moving, something tender, something unusually dignified. But this connection occurred only when the camera was on.

It was as if the quiet, barely audible, monotonous hum of the camera; the anticipation in the suppressed breaths of those around us; Kurtág lost in thought; his timeless gaze; the almost sensual silence of his hands folded in his lap, where even the faintest friction of his palms rubbing together could be heard; this silence, lingering for a fraction of a moment before suddenly receding—as if all of this together had opened up another space and time. The tension of this situation allowed something to *happen*, but not knowing what will happen in the next moment. I had the sense that Kurtág does not plan, implement, or conduct anything. He is simply present in the moment itself.

That became the most important thing for me: his fragmentary sentences and the dense silence surrounding them, the flutter of his face and hands. They spoke. They told a story without words. They opened a window to a place that reason cannot penetrate, to the irresolvable fog of contradictions, to the delicate line that separates the desire to forget from the desire to remember, softness from hardness, letting go from wanting to hold on, and control over things from the feeling of loss. "I am looking for something true," Kurtág said during one of the recordings, as a kind of summary of what he had been doing all his life.

He revealed very little about what this truth might be. However, we became aware that this truth does not shout. It is the quietest. It cannot be told. It cannot be described. But I think it can be felt and touched.

Translation by Gergely Fazekas

ALEXANDER POLZIN
Man kann nicht

Man kann nicht über/zu Kurtág schreiben.

Ich kann nicht über/zu Kurtág schreiben.

Vielleicht große Poeten wie Beckett oder Achmatova können eine Sprache finden um einen Austausch anzubieten mit dem was dieser Komponist kreiert.

Immer wieder hat er deren Arbeit umarmt und sich jede Note zu ihnen abgerungen um kein überflüssiges Geräusch zu hinterlassen.

Kurtág ist der Ernstfall. Kurtág ist die Notwendigkeit.

Ich kann nicht über Kurtág schreiben. Alles andere ist Anekdote. Amüsant vielleicht oder beängstigend. Ich erinnere mich zum Beispiel wie sein engster Komponisten Freund einen großen Preis erhalten sollte und sich wünschte dass Kurtág die Laudatio auf ihn hält. Die Ausarbeitung der Rede dauerte quälende Monate. Nichts schien ihm angemessen zu sagen und zum Schluss beschrieb er wie vier Menschen in einer Budapester Kammer gemeinsam musizierend durch dienopernpartituren wandern. Musik als Lebensmittel und/oder Zweck.

György Kurtág hat jetzt ein Jahrhundert damit verbracht dass war er ausdrücken MUSS in Musik zu finden. Die Radikalität bzw. Unbedingtheit dieses Weges kann jeder bestätigen der ihm begegnet ist. Aber viel kostbarer ist es das wir diese Absolutheit hören können. Mit Genuss. Mit Neugier. Mit Staunen.

Hellwach. Ein Geschenk.

Ich kann nicht über Kurtág schreiben.

One cannot write about Kurtág.

I cannot write about Kurtág.

Perhaps great poets such as Beckett or Akhmatova can find a language to offer an exchange with what this composer creates.

Time and again, he embraced their work and wrestled every note from them so as not to leave any superfluous noise.

Kurtág is emergency. Kurtág is necessity.

I cannot write about Kurtág. Everything else is anecdote. Amusing perhaps, or frightening. I remember, for example, how his closest composer friend was to receive a major award and wanted Kurtág to give the laudatory speech. The speech took agonizing months to write. Nothing he could say seemed appropriate, and in the end he described how four people in a Budapest chamber wander through opera scores while making music together. Music as sustenance and/or purpose.

György Kurtág has now spent a century finding what he MUST express in music. Anyone who has encountered him can confirm the radicalism or uncompromising nature of this path. But it is much more precious that we can hear this absoluteness. With pleasure. With curiosity. With amazement.

Wide awake. A gift.

I cannot write about Kurtág.

ALLEN SHAWN
György Kurtág: In Praise of Interiority

Life and death, . . . which are merely words . . . (J. D. Salinger)
Monuments
Dialogue
Amnesia
Composing from being a musician
Butterfly hunting . . . in my net, the wind. (Bashō)

Let us please avoid words like "modernism," "postmodernism," and the like. They are as irrelevant as is the word "classicism" in regard to the slow movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata in D Major, K. 576, which György Kurtág played on October 17, 2020, the first anniversary of the death of his wife, Márta. "Modernism" and "postmodernism" and "classicism" are only words. When it comes to music's succession of sounds, words are a net with holes in it. Let us admit that we are only just beginning to know Kurtág's music, let alone internalize it as he has internalized so much music he didn't compose himself. How many works of Kurtág can we play by heart?

Let us admit we are neither scholars nor musicologists nor intellectuals capable of subjecting his scores to analysis. We are humble composers and musicians who are trying to understand our own paths, both in music and in the world, and for whom Kurtág's presence, his participation in music in the present, has a powerful significance. But this significance cannot be analyzed or verbalized, because it is borne out in his work and all it confronts and conveys, and in both what it is and in what it is not. He is an example. His power cannot be measured, but one can speculate on its weight by imagining him removed from the scale, leaving an emptiness that resounds in our own need. Yet also leaving behind it imprints, footprints in the snow that were not there before. Footprints to the chants of medieval monks, to Schubert.

He is a listener. As intense in his listening involvement to Schütz, or Bach, or Schumann, as to his own emerging music. He composes because he listens, because he plays; he plays because he composes, because he listens. Because when he heard the cellos and basses at the opening of the Schubert Symphony in B Minor for the first time, it was as if it was not for the first time, it was as if it was already a part of him, speaking for him, issuing from him, giving voice to something already in him. It was not coming from the past. It was there. Even if it had been lost in his amnesia. He is like an amnesiac who has awakened and rediscovered all of the music he had forgotten. His dialogue with the music of the dead is internal, yet externalized through his own sounds.

"There was a cartoon in *Ludas Matyi* that showed a snail equipped with a speedometer. I kept it for a long time: it was an apt description of the way I work." Monuments to the dead. *Officium Breve*. Fifteen small movements that accumulate into a small monument. Small things. Insect-like marks on a page. A strand of music by Endre Szervánszky that somehow stands for a life in music, and in which somehow each note has become so large because of how Kurtág, the composer of *Officium Breve*, heard it and composed around it. Works that started in pain and dread, as the most minute marks; marks accumulated over a lifetime. Works that do not exemplify achieving, or mastering, but are a matter of striving. But also, somehow, of connecting, or rescuing—not from "religion," but as a project of *religio*: awe and anxiety (ancient), also: to go over carefully, to bind, to rebind.

That György Kurtág, who was "living like an insect" in his 30s, is still here, composing at age 100, is a miracle that links the interiority of us all to his interiority, and to all of the consciousness, and all of the music, that came before us.

György Kurtág

TAMARA STEFANOVICH
Two Notes

Everyone has their "boot camp" story about György Kurtág—tales of survival, obsession, breakdowns.

Everyone will proudly tell you how Kurtág once took three, six, nine hours to perfect two bars. Or two notes. We all wear these stories like medals—badges of honor, resilience, rebirth, and restart.

But I want to tell you a different story.

It also involves two notes.

When I first worked with him, I had no idea who he was. Maybe that was the secret to our long collaboration—ignorance can be very brave. I was blissfully unfazed by the colleague who played, or tried to play before me, whom Kurtág ordered to go up to the stage, take a bow, sit, think of the first note and then not play—just to feel . . . well . . . everything.

I thought I could do that. I ended up playing Beethoven, Haydn, even a little Mozart for him, and somehow he uncovered layers that no one knew were there. Later, I recorded his own music under his control. It was excruciatingly . . . well, everything. And I wouldn't have missed it for anything. But what I learned about him can be summed up in one moment—and, fittingly, in two notes.

It happened in Budapest, after a concert celebrating his 90th birthday.

I was asked to play the Double Concerto—the one that begins with two F-sharp notes. I played them exactly as marked: short, precise, dynamic, just so. We had recorded it that way, with his blessing. I thought I was safe. How ignorant.

But immediately after the concert, Kurtág came up to me, his eyes gleaming.

"The beginning. The two notes. It should be more," he said.

Then louder: "More!"

And again—"MORE!"

And then again—"More, more, more!"

I stood there thinking, But where? What more?

I only have two notes! They're short! They're not loud!

Should I make them more expressive? But which kind of expressive? It's impossible—the articulation is fixed, I can't make them longer or shorter without breaking the laws of notation!

The mystery was solved the next day at lunch.

György and his wife, Márta, sat across from me, watching as I juggled conversation and a squirming baby Arthur in my lap. They exchanged a look—that quiet, knowing, slightly mischievous look of people who have just solved a riddle.
Finally, György leaned in with a grin.
"This," he said, nodding at me, "is what I meant. The two notes should be played more like you are."
I blinked. "But . . . how am I?"
He laughed. "You are a boss."

It sounded like a line from *The Godfather*, but what he meant was simple: I should have owned the notes. Not played them as written, but as mine. Being utterly present, not redoing something learned. Not treading on steps already made.

That's Kurtág—part composer, part psychological archaeologist. He digs up long-buried emotions you didn't know were there—too fragile to touch, too vital to ignore. He's an x-ray doctor of music, showing you the bones beneath your technique, the skeleton that holds up the sound.

At the core of everything, he wants YOU to be the core.

Not the ink, not the score—you. Humble, but alive. Burning for the essence. Not safe.

For him, music exists only in the urgent immediacy of now.

Not as you practiced, not as the audience expects, but as it must be—alive, unfiltered, unapologetically present.

That's why he's not just the composer of the past or the future.

He's the composer of now—the only time that ever truly matters.

ABOUT THE PERFORMERS

Baritone **Benjamin Appl** began his musical life as a chorister with the Regensburger Domspatzen and studied in Munich and at London's Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Mentored by the legendary Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Appl appears at major festivals and venues worldwide, from Wigmore Hall and the Elbphilharmonie to the Philharmonie de Paris and Sydney Opera House. As an orchestral soloist, he has collaborated with ensembles such as the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, and Staatskapelle Dresden, and recently served as artist in residence with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic. Renowned for imaginative programming, Appl performs repertoire spanning early music to contemporary works, premiering pieces by Jörg Widmann, Nico Muhly, and Matthias Pintscher, and maintaining a long-standing artistic partnership with György Kurtág.

Demian Austin is principal trombonist of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and a member of the Met Orchestra Chamber Ensemble, appearing regularly at Carnegie Hall's Weill and Zankel Halls. He has also performed with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and at the Mostly Mozart Festival. Austin is featured on numerous recordings, including Metropolitan Opera Brass releases, major film soundtracks, *Dialogues with Double Bass* with Jeremy McCoy (Bridge Records), and recordings of Beethoven and Brahms conducted by Gunther Schuller. He can be heard on SiriusXM's *Live from the Met*, the Met's Saturday matinee broadcasts, and worldwide *Met Live in HD* cinema simulcasts. Austin serves on the faculty of Bard College Conservatory of Music, Manhattan School of Music, and The Juilliard School's Pre-College Division.

James Baillieu performs worldwide with leading singers and instrumentalists including Ian Bostridge, Lise Davidsen, Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, and Pretty Yende, as well as ensembles such as the Elias and Heath Quartets. As a soloist, he has appeared with the Ulster Orchestra, English Chamber Orchestra, and Wiener Kammersymphonie. A regular guest at major halls including Carnegie Hall, the Concertgebouw, Wiener Musikverein, and the Barbican, he also appears at festivals such as Aix-en-Provence, Verbier, Edinburgh, and Aldeburgh. A prizewinner at the Wigmore Hall, Kathleen Ferrier Award, and Das Lied competitions, Baillieu is a Borletti-Buitoni Trust Fellow. His acclaimed discography features collaborations with Benjamin Appl and Tamsin Waley-Cohen. He is senior professor of ensemble piano at the Royal Academy of Music and works with young artists internationally.

Lucy Fitz Gibbon is a versatile soprano whose repertoire spans from the Renaissance to today. An advocate for both early and contemporary music, she has presented US premieres of rediscovered Baroque works by Francesco Sacrati, Barbara Strozzi, and Agostino Agazzari, alongside rarely heard 20th-century composers including Tadeusz Kassern, Roman Palester, and Jean Barraqué. Fitz Gibbon has collaborated with such leading composers as John Harbison, Kate Soper, Sheila Silver, David Hertzberg, Reena Esmail, and Pauline Oliveros, bringing new works to life with clarity and artistic integrity. In 2024, she was awarded a fellowship from the Borletti-Buitoni Trust in recognition of her distinctive artistry.

Benjamin Hochman is a pianist and conductor recognized for his insightful programming and artistic depth. A winner of Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Career Grant, he made his concerto debut with the Israel Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall and has since performed with major orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic and Prague Philharmonia, and at venues such as the Philharmonie in Berlin and the Louvre. He has conducted orchestras including the English Chamber Orchestra and Santa Fe Pro Musica. He is artistic director of the Kurtág Festival at the Bard College Conservatory of Music, and a lecturer at Bard College Berlin.

Pianist **Kayo Iwama** has performed extensively with renowned singers including Stephanie Blythe, Dawn Upshaw, and Rufus Müller, in major venues such as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, and Théâtre du Châtelet. Praised for her sensitivity and virtuosity in the *Boston Globe* and elsewhere, she is associate director of Bard College's Graduate Vocal Arts Program. A longtime faculty member at Tanglewood, she has worked with James Levine, Seiji Ozawa, and Robert Spano. Her recordings include *Die Schöne Müllerin* with Christòpheren Nomura, and works by John Harbison.

András Kemenes graduated from the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music after early piano training in Budapest. His principal teachers included Pál Kadosa, Ferenc Rados, and György Kurtág. His postgraduate studies took place at the Tchaikovsky Moscow State Conservatory and in Dresden with Amadeus Webersinke. Kemenes has performed widely in Hungary and internationally as both a soloist and chamber musician, and he appears regularly in piano duo repertoire with Gábor Csalog. He taught at the Kodály Institute in Kecskemét and is currently on the piano faculty of the Liszt Academy.

Alexandra Knoll pursued advanced studies at the Curtis Institute of Music and The Juilliard School. She serves as associate principal oboist of the New York City Ballet Orchestra, principal oboist of the American Symphony Orchestra, and a member of New York City Opera. She also performs frequently with the Metropolitan Opera, New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, American Composers Orchestra, and The Knights. Her versatility extends to Broadway, where she has played in *Mary Poppins*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *Miss Saigon*, and to recording projects with artists including Rufus Wainwright and Lenny Kravitz. Knoll is on the oboe faculty of the Bard College Conservatory of Music.

Pianist **Ryan MacEvoy McCullough** is a versatile soloist, collaborator, composer, and educator. He has premiered numerous works, and has recordings on labels including Innova, Albany, and Parma. He is the founder of False Azure Records, dedicated to new and overlooked repertoire. He has appeared on PBS's *Great Performances* and NPR's *From the Top*, performed with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and collaborated with the Mark Morris Dance Group. A faculty member at the Bard College Conservatory of Music, he lives in Kingston, New York, with his wife, soprano Lucy Fitz Gibbon.

Bassoonist **Philip McNaughton**, based in Kingston, New York, has performed across the United States, Canada, and Europe, including at festivals such as the Bard Music Festival and Bard SummerScape Opera. His recordings appear on Naxos, Bridge, Avie, and Deutsche Grammophon, and he is featured in the Academy Award–nominated film *Maestro*. Currently, he plays with the Glens Falls and Eastern Connecticut Symphony Orchestras. McNaughton holds degrees from The Hartt School, Yale School of Music, and Bard College.

Tubist **Marcus Rojas** has performed with he Metropolitan Opera, American Ballet Theatre, American Symphony Orchestra, Radio City Music Hall, and ensembles led by Lionel Hampton, David Byrne, and P. D. Q. Bach. A proponent of contemporary, improvised, and classical music, he has performed premieres by such composers as LaMonte Young, Gunther Schuller, and Peter Schickele. He has recorded with CBS Records, Sony Records, and A&M Records, and has been heard on many film scores, including *Interview with a Vampire* and *Sleepless in Seattle*.

Erika Switzer is a collaborative pianist who appears regularly at major venues including Carnegie Hall's Weill Hall, the Kennedy Center, Frick Collection, Bargemusic, and leading chamber music festivals in North America and Europe. *The New York Times* has praised her playing as "precise and lucid." Switzer spent several years in Germany, performing at venues such as the Festspielhaus Baden-Baden and earning prizes at the Robert Schumann, Hugo Wolf, and Wigmore Hall international song competitions. She cofounded Sparks & Wiry Cries with soprano Martha Guth, commissioning new works and producing the songSLAM festival. She serves on the faculty of Bard College and the Bard College Conservatory of Music.

András Szalai studied at Béla Bartók Conservatory and graduated from Franz Liszt Academy of Music as a cimbalom player and composer. He has won national and international cimbalom competitions, performed solo and chamber concerts, and appeared in festivals and with the Hungarian, Slovenian, Warsaw, Krakow, Łodź, Moscow, and Valencia orchestras, as well as the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra. He often works with contemporary composers, including György Kurtág. He is a member of the UMZE Ensemble and Ludium Ensemble, the latter led by Gábor Csalog and founded to perform the pieces of György Kurtág. He teaches composition and music theory at St. Stephen Conservatory in Budapest, and cimbalom and chamber music at Ferenc Liszt Academy of Music.

Violinist **Mira Wang** has appeared as soloist with orchestras including the Boston Symphony, Staatskapelle Dresden, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, and NDR Radiophilharmonie. As a chamber musician, she performs with partners such as Hélène Grimaud, Jeremy Denk, Pamela Frank, and Lars Anders Tomter. Wang has premiered major contemporary works by Chen Yi, John Harbison, Wolfgang Rihm, and William Blank with prominent orchestras and conductors. Her recordings for Sony Classical and other labels include concertos by Sergei Prokofiev and Camlle Saint-Saëns, as well as numerous chamber releases. Wang is artistic director of the Model Room Musicales series in New York and director of the Moritzburg Festival Academy in Germany. She studied in Beijing and at Boston University.

Performers also include students from the Bard College Conservatory of Music and Bard Conservatory Preparatory Division.

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