Re-examining György Kurtág:  
a renewed understanding of his compositional  
philosophies as seen in *Signs, Games and Messages*.  

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This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Music (Research) of the University of Western Australia  

Faculty of Arts  
School of Music  
2017
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Abstract

Hungarian-born composer György Kurtág (b.1926) is an intriguing and enigmatic figure of Western Art Music. Even a cursory exploration of his life and works reveals a cohesive and personal style, an impeccable musical intuition and a profound depth - a depth which, at first sight, may appear to lie in stark contrast to the short, aphoristic pieces for which he is known. Though there has been significant research into the biographical details of his life and music, as well as analyses of his important works, there are virtually no attempts by writers to tie together the threads of his complex compositional philosophies or show their manifestation in his musical language. Through a re-examination of the primary source material in which Kurtág speaks at length about his music, this thesis will present a renewed understanding of his compositional philosophies, approach and process. The manifestation of these concepts in the defining elements of Kurtág musical language will be examined, using some key works as examples. These examples will come principally from a set of works which has been neglected in the research, Signs, Games and Messages. In particular, pieces from the viola version of this set of works will be examined. In explicating the nexus between Kurtág’s compositional philosophies and his music, this thesis aims to provide a more holistic view of Kurtág as a composer.
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors Dr. Victoria Rogers and Dr. Christopher Tonkin for their immense support and guidance in writing this thesis. Their expertise and willingness to help throughout this degree has been invaluable and does not go unnoticed. I would also like to thank Linda Papa at the Wigmore Music Library for her patience and depth of knowledge, as well as the staff at the UWA School of Music.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their support and understanding, and particularly for never asking too many stress-inducing questions about the subject of this thesis.
Chapter 1

Introduction

The playwright, poet and author Samuel Beckett once said of his writing: 'Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness'. In particular, Beckett’s short and fragmented, yet vigorously expressive poems have influenced not only a great many writers, but also some composers, notably the Hungarian-born György Kurtág (b. 1926). Indeed, Kurtág’s music exhibits distinctly similar qualities to Beckett’s poetry, a source to which Kurtág returns time and time again as a source of inspiration.

Beckett is just one of many sources of inspiration from which the composer draws, however Kurtág’s music is far from a confused amalgam of his influences. Even a cursory exploration of the composer’s life and works reveals a cohesive and personal style, an impeccable musical intuition and a profound depth - a depth which, at first sight, may appear to lie in stark contrast to the short, aphoristic pieces for which he is known. Kurtág is a rare breed of composer who has found a way of expressing the deepest intricacies of his art in music which is at once baffling yet oddly familiar, at times completely opaque in its musical language whilst at others, quite translucent.

A combination of opacity and translucency in musical language is not atypical for a Hungarian composer and in many ways György Kurtág, who recently celebrated his ninetieth birthday, follows in the tradition of the Hungarian composers who came before him. He is a proud nationalist who often utilises folk idioms, an accomplished performer and a respected pedagogue. Indeed, both Kurtág and his close friend and fellow composer György Ligeti had planned to study with Béla Bartók at the Franz
Liszt Academy, plans which could never be fulfilled due to Bartók’s untimely death in 1945. Despite this, Kurtág began a life-long affiliation with the Academy, at which he earned diplomas in performance (as a pianist), chamber music, and composition; he later became a professor of piano and chamber music, positions which he held between 1967 and 1986. Though Kurtág is far better known as a composer, his composition diploma was the last qualification that he completed; at this time he was already thirty years of age. It would not be until four years later - following his rejection of his early compositional efforts - that he wrote a piece he considered of sufficient merit to hold the title of first opus: the String Quartet op. 1.

Two years later Kurtág wrote Jelek op. 5 for solo viola, a piece which would, amongst many others, inspire and contribute to a much larger set of works thirty years later: Signs, Games and Messages (1989). This set of works lies at the heart of this thesis, which examines Kurtág’s compositional philosophies and their manifestation in Signs, Games and Messages, as well as some of his other important works. In order to understand the context of Signs, Games and Messages, and given Kurtág’s predilection for drawing upon material from earlier compositions, a brief historical survey of his compositional output prior to Signs, Games and Messages is necessary.

**Historical Survey of Works**

Kurtág divides his entire life into two parts using the String Quartet op. 1 as the fulcrum, such was the importance he placed on its composition. Indeed, he has said that the first seven measures of the string quartet are not only the starting point of the whole
movement, but also of the entire quartet and, beyond that, of an entire life’s work.¹ This ‘entire life’s work’ has been categorised in a number of ways, but by far the most useful system is that of Sylvia Grmela. In her doctoral thesis, written in 2004, Grmela provides a perceptive and incisive overview of Kurtág’s works between 1959 and the late 1990s. Her framework categorises Kurtág’s entire output into four periods: 1959-1968, 1973-1980, 1980-1988, and 1988 on. This is a particularly useful framework through which to view Kurtág’s compositional output, and it will therefore form the basis of the following historical overview.

From 1959 to 1968, Kurtág completed a few instrumental works including the String Quartet op.1 (1959), a wind quintet (1959) and Jelek or ‘Signs’ for solo viola (1961, rev. 1992). During this time he also composed one of his better known works for voice, The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza, a concerto for soprano and orchestra set to words by a 16th century Hungarian preacher. After 1968, Kurtág entered a period of artistic paralysis, one which would not end until 1973.

This five year gap ended with the composition of Splinters (1973) for cimbalom, and Elő-Játékok or ‘Pre-games’ for piano (1973). Pre-games is presumably a reference to Játékok (Games) (1975-79), which was originally intended as a series of pedagogical pieces for children but is now no longer considered by Kurtág to serve this purpose. Játékok is comprised of around one hundred individual pieces, of which twelve are given the subtitle ‘Twelve Microludi’; the shortest of the microludi is just two notes long. It appears as though Kurtág was fascinated by the concept of twelve short pieces,

¹ Jürg Stenzl, liner notes for György Kurtág - Musik Für Streichinstumente, ECM Records LC 2516 (Vienna, 1995).
as he also wrote a second set of microludes in *Játékok*, and again for string quartet similarly titled *Hommage à Mihály András: 12 Microludes for String Quartet* (1977-78). In 1974, Kurtág began work on his piano transcriptions, for four hands, of J.S. Bach chorales, which are contained within *Transcriptions from Machaut to J.S. Bach*. Together with some pieces from *Játékok*, Kurtág’s transcriptions of Bach chorales are the only pieces which he and his wife Márta continue to perform, despite both Kurtág and Márta being highly accomplished pianists. Towards the end of the 1970s, Kurtág began work on one of his more famous works, *Grabstein für Stephan* (1978-89). This moving work for solo guitar and ‘groups of instruments dispersed in space’ was written in memorial to the husband of Marianne Stein - the psychologist who had a profound and lasting effect on Kurtág both musically and personally. Neither *Transcriptions from Machaut to J.S. Bach* nor *Grabstein für Stephan* are mentioned by Grmela, however they are significant and well-known works by Kurtág and have therefore been included in this survey.

The next period in Grmela’s historical survey begins in 1980, when Kurtág completed *Messages of the Late Miss R.V. Trousova*, a work which he began in 1976 and which is indicative of his increasing fascination with Russian literature. Grmela notes that Kurtág wrote exclusively vocal works between 1980 and 1988, such as the *Eight Choruses to Poems by Dezső Tandori* (1981-1982, rev. 1984). This is not entirely correct, as she fails to mention a short piece for flute, double bass and piano which Kurtág wrote in 1980 as well as a piece for cello, *János Pilinszky: Gérard de Nerval* written in 1986.
In 1988, Kurtág completed one of his best known works: *...quasi una fantasia...* for piano and ‘groups of instruments dispersed in space’. Kurtág views this piece as heralding the beginning of a new compositional phase, one which Grmela asserts stems directly from the composer’s new found fame, and which continues until the present day. Indeed *...quasi una fantasia...* and many other works were the result of high-profile commissions by the Berlin Philharmonic, Ensemble Intercontemporain, and the Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra, amongst others.

In 1989, Kurtág began composition on a set of works which are still being completed at the present time: *Signs, Games and Messages*. This title refers to a large collection of works, each of which is contained within a set for a particular instrument or group of instruments. There are currently sets of pieces written for each string and wind instrument, ensembles of strings, ensembles of winds, and some ensembles which include strings and winds. Each of the sets for different instruments is titled *Signs, Games and Messages* and may include some of the same individual pieces as other sets, however, they each set is unique and linked only by the title *Signs, Games and Messages* as well as their respective instrumentations. Beckles-Wilson addresses this potential confusion by writing: 'In the end, the work defies description other than its chosen title. It is: *Signs, Games and Messages*'.

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2 The … are part of the title


4 The original hungarian title is *'Jelek, Játékok és Üzenetek'*, however, as the publisher of these works, Editio Musico Budapest provides an approved english title, this thesis will use only this translation, which, coincidentally, is also very accurate.

This survey has highlighted some of the key works in each of Kurtág’s compositional periods. The total number of works written, numbers to this point, around 85. Many of these works are sets of pieces, such as *Signs, Games and Messages*, which would bring the total number of individual pieces to around 400.

**Literature Review**

The writings about Kurtág’s life and music number well over one hundred. Though they cover a reasonably wide range of topics, these writings can be classified into two broad categories. The first category comprises writings of a biographical and philosophical nature, and include, at the same time, general information about his music, and his unique rehearsal techniques. The second group analyses Kurtág’s scores. There are less than ten writings which fall within the first category, of which only three are widely cited by scholars. The second group of writings is by far the larger, numbering, at present, over one hundred. Some of these writings, however, address subjects which are not directly relevant to this thesis, for example one dealing with the influence of Russian literature upon Kurtág’s music. This body of writings - biographical, philosophical and analytical - has some value in providing a contextual background to this study. Few, however, feed directly into this thesis and this only the most relevant will be discussed in the ensuing literature review.

*Writings of a biographical and philosophical nature*

Included in the first category - biographical and philosophical overviews - are writings by the current authority on Kurtág and his music, Rachel Beckles-Wilson. She
is the author of the Grove Music Online article on Kurtág, and also of numerous papers and reviews which discuss various features of his music. The Grove Music Online article, like most of her writings on this subject, functions best as an introduction to the composer and his music, and outlines four main periods in the Kurtág’s life: 1926-57, 1957-72, 1973-84, and 1985 on. For each of these periods, Beckles-Wilson provides details on significant life events, such as his therapy sessions with psychologist Marianne Stein, and also provides examples of important works in his output, such as the String Quartet op.1, which was composed directly as a result of his sessions with Stein. Beckles-Wilson has also authored other articles which replicate this broad approach, although some highlight particular aspects of his music. An example of the latter provides a survey of Kurtág’s instrumental music, in which she skilfully interweaves commentary on his works and philosophies with a broad, yet concise, biographical overview. Over the course of this survey, Beckles-Wilson identifies musical elements common to much of Kurtág’s work, for example the ‘objet trouvé’ or ‘found object’ - a term used by Kurtág to describe motifs that arise as a consequence of the intrinsic properties of an instrument such as the open strings on a violin or the natural decay of the sound of the piano. Beckles-Wilson has also written articles which are more focused in nature, two of which have been published online in the Central Europe Review. The first discusses three of Kurtag's works which were performed at the Edinburgh International Festival in 2000. For each, Beckles-Wilson comments on the salient compositional features and also the context in which they were written. One of the works included in this review is Signs, Games and Messages, specifically the solo

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versions for violin, viola, and cello, respectively, as well as the version for string trio.

Beckles-Wilson's descriptions of these pieces are somewhat superficially confined to the most basic musical elements in order to give an impression of the music to someone who might not have been present at the performance. More useful is the second article, which discusses of Kurtág’s philosophies in which Beckles-Wilson outlines some of the significant influences and essential concepts underpinning Kurtág’s music. In discussing his economy of language, the Soviet occupation of Hungary and the influence of Russian literature, Beckles-Wilson provides an evocative overview of the composer, however it is beyond the scope of her article to provide any analysis of the musical works which she cites. The usefulness of this article stems from its probing discussion of the influences upon Kurtág, which provides greater insight into the composer than the first article, and is one of the few writings to address these issues in a clear and concise manner.

Also included in the first category are authors Paul Griffiths and Stephen Walsh, both of whom provide informative and indeed seminal writings on Kurtág and his music. Griffiths includes Kurtág in his book *Modern Music and After*, referencing important events in his life, whilst at the same time locating the composer within the wider context of Central European music, and citing some major works by the composer.9 This book is a first port of call for any research into twentieth century music generally, however the section on Kurtág presents mainly biographical material. More valuable is Griffiths' insightful discussion of Kurtag’s rehearsal technique in his article ‘The Voice That Must Articulate: Kurtág in rehearsal and performance’. In this article,


Griffiths highlights Kurtág’s exacting standards for the performance not only of his own works, but also of works by other composers. Through observation of a number of rehearsals, Griffiths notes the subtlety of Kurtág’s requests, amongst the more revealing of which is ‘for emphasis to be obtained not by a raised dynamic but by another colour: heavy, dark, solid, present.’. It would seem that such insights could only be gleaned through direct contact with Kurtág; indeed, Griffiths and Beckles-Wilson are two of the few researchers who have been able to work closely with the composer.

Stephen Walsh, on the other hand, appears not to have had such close contact with Kurtág, though his study does not suffer for it. Walsh provides the first detailed discussion of the composer’s life and music in his two-part article titled ‘György Kurtág - An Outline Study’. Just as Beckles-Wilson, some sixteen years later, would interweave biographical details with commentary on his instrumental works, so too does Walsh provide a foundation for understanding the composer and his oeuvre. The function and content of this article is much the same as the Grove Music Online entry on Kurtág and it is cited by Beckles-Wilson as the first source she used. Though Kurtág had written a number of important works by 1982, Walsh’s article is inevitably less comprehensive than those written later. It is an important article, however, and is cited by many writers, most notably Paul Griffiths who, in the footnote of Modern Music and After, urges the reader to investigate the article by Walsh.

Beckles-Wilson, Griffiths and Walsh are three major authorities on Kurtág, however there is another author who has written a fascinating introduction to Kurtag’s


music and life: Tom Service. ‘A Guide to György Kurtág’s Music’, which was published online through The Guardian in 2013, is a short, yet highly informative article that captures many of the key features that define Kurtág’s music, for example Kurtág’s use of brevity and his evocative titles. Service begins his article by referencing a video of György and Márta Kurtág performing selections from Játékok, and also his transcriptions of Bach chorales for four hands. This allows the reader to form an impression of the composer which, in the absence of the video, would require a much longer article and would reduce the effectiveness of Service’s clear and conversational writing. As such, this guide to Kurtág’s music is an excellent introduction for those unfamiliar with the composer and also provides a strong argument for utilising the video recordings of Kurtág to enhance and inform further research on the composer.

Taken together, these four authors - Beckles-Wilson, Griffiths, Walsh and Service - provide an excellent overview of Kurtág’s life and music, as well as a small amount of discussion of issues more philosophical in nature. The usefulness of their writings lies in the holistic picture they provide of Kurtág and of the influences upon him. The limitations of these articles, however, stem from the lack of musical examples to illustrate the concepts they discuss; discussions of Kurtág’s compositional philosophy, furthermore, tends to be brief and found only within the biographical contexts which the articles address.

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Analyses of Kurtág’s scores

The second category of writings examines Kurtág’s scores in some detail. Central to these writings are theses by Margaret McLay and Sylvia Grmela, published in 1986 and 2004 respectively. McLay’s thesis, ‘The Music of György Kurtág’, begins with a biographical section which quickly moves on to a discussion of Kurtág’s compositional influences and the general features of his music, before analysing individual pieces. Throughout her analyses, McLay draws some interesting comparisons between works by Kurtág and those by other composers. Surprisingly, however, she comes to no clear conclusion in her thesis. Her analyses of Kurtág’s scores is excellent and exhaustive, though it sheds light only on the musical devices which the composer uses and not Kurtág himself. In essence, it appears McLay refrains from suggesting why Kurtág has made a certain musical choice, instead she only describes the choice itself. As such, the usefulness of this article is limited to providing background information on the composer.

Similar in scope and structure is a thesis by Grmela, ‘Pitch Structure and Recall in Kurtág’s Instrumental Music’, in which she examines Kurtág’s recycling of his own material and the inclusion of material by other composers. Grmela is the first author to distinguish compositional periods in Kurtág’s life. Beginning with the composition of the string quartet in 1959, she identifies four periods in Kurtág’s mature compositional

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output: 1959-1973, 1973-1980, 1980 to the late 1980’s, and the late 1980’s on. This categorisation is different from that of Beckles-Wilson, whose biographical categorisations cover Kurtág’s life from birth.\textsuperscript{16} Following this biographical section, Grmela presents an interesting analytical tool called the ‘diachromeasure’, which is an extension of traditional set-theory analysis. The usefulness of such a tool in this context is highly questionable: Grmela spends the entire second chapter of her thesis outlining the diachromeasure in almost incomprehensible language; furthermore, the device sheds no light on Kurtág’s music in any appreciable way. She does, however, acknowledge this, mentioning in her conclusion that ‘the validity of the measure as an analytical tool for Kurtág’s music remains an open question’.\textsuperscript{17} Nonetheless, Grmela’s thesis is a highly useful writing as it outlines in great detail the common musical devices that Kurtág uses in his music, together with examples of these devices in his scores. Furthermore, the insight gained from her examination of Kurtág’s use of the ‘objet trouvé’ and also of his use of ‘repetition and recall’ can be easily applied to many of his works, most of which contain recycled material in some form.

Writings which build upon the research by Grmela and McLay are those by Mika Pelo, Gösta Neuwirth, Steven Argosh and again, Margaret McLay. The authors in this group examine specific works or concepts, in contrast to the broader brushstroke used by Grmela and McLay. Pelo, in his doctoral thesis written in 2007, focuses on the third movement of \textit{Stele} (1994), Kurtág’s largest orchestral work, and examines details of its

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

thematic material and Kurtág’s propensity towards ‘skewed symmetry’. This a term coined by Pelo to describe the composer's frequent use of musical material which closely follows a clear pattern, but is altered in such a way as to deny true symmetry. To form the basis of his examination of Stele, Pelo draws upon Sylvia Grmela’s aforementioned discussion of musical recycling; like Grmela, he also notes that Kurtág’s constant reuse of fragmented material leads to both a unique and unified style. Though Pelo’s thesis only examines Stele, his discussion of the reuse and recycling of material can be applied to most of Kurtág’s works.

Also examining a specific piece is musicologist Gösta Neuwirth, who discusses and analyses ‘Klangendes Lied’ - a piece included in the viola set of Signs, Games and Messages. Published in 2011, in the German journal Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, this article uses Schenkerian analysis and set theory to identify gestures and underlying musical structures, and compares these with those found in other pieces by Kurtág. This article is notable as it is the only writing which discusses any part of Signs, Games and Messages in detail. Its limitation, however, is that it does not examine Signs, Games and Messages as a whole, or within the context of Kurtág’s wider compositional philosophies.


Where Pelo and Neuwirth examine specific pieces, Argosh and McLay examine a specific concept prevalent in Kurtág’s music: brevity. Argosh, in his article entitled ‘Nine Short Pieces: Brevity in the Music of Beethoven, Webern and Kurtág’, compares brevity in the music of these three composers and examines how the miniature form can lead to a heightened opportunity for expressivity. Argosh’s inclusion of Beethoven, a composer not commonly associated with brevity, serves to demonstrate that the miniature form, on its own, can lend a unique characteristic to a work, even in the context of functional harmony. Furthermore, in order to highlight the fact that pieces which employ this form are not attempting merely to compress large-scale procedures within a miniature context, Argosh notes that ‘the musical miniature should not be confused with the miniature poodle or the bonsai plant’. Rather, he posits that it is a unique form of expression which allows a listener to ‘form a total shape, hold on to it with some stability, and ruminate on it in the moments of silence that follow.’

Following a broad introduction to the concept of brevity, Argosh goes on to examine nine short pieces by Beethoven, Webern and Kurtág, suggesting that ‘the most distinctive characteristics of these works follow as a consequence of their conception as short pieces’.

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22 Ibid., p. 34.

23 Ibid., p. 3.

24 Ibid., p. 3.

25 Ibid., p. 2.
A similar discussion can be found in McLay’s article ‘György Kurtág’s Microludes’, In this article, which is more concise than that by Argosh, McLay identifies the musical devices through which Kurtág creates a sense of unity and completion in these short works. Though the miniature form is common to much of Kurtág’s output, McLay chooses to focus on the ‘microlude’ - a term which is used frequently by the composer to describe the shortest of his works, most notably in his pedagogical works for piano, Játékok, and also in his string quartet, Hommage à Mihály András: 12 Microludes for String Quartet. McLay examines both of these, but goes into greater depth when discussing the string quartet, which she considers to be the more ‘serious’ of the two works. Much of McLay’s article is concerned with distilling the essential gesture underpinning each microlude for string quartet; she also highlights the organic evolution of the set of twelve as a whole. In combination with Kurtág’s tendency to recycle material as discussed by Grmela and Pelo, this organic evolution is a fundamental characteristic of the string quartet, which McLay believes distinguishes it from the microludes found in Játékok. McLay’s article serves as a valuable model for the examination of gesture in Kurtág’s music, in particular through its discussion of the way in which Kurtag employs extremely short gestures to create music that is simultaneously both fleeting and satisfying.

From the above literature review, it is clear that there exists sufficient biographical information on Kurtág, especially during his more formative years, to form a reasonably clear picture of the major influences upon the composer and his compositional style.

27 Ibid., p. 2.
Additionally, a significant amount of research has been conducted into the analysis of Kurtág’s music and this research tends to be focused on the identification of the musical gestures and devices which constitute the most distinctive characteristics in these pieces. There are, however, two areas of research in which the literature on Kurtág is lacking: the discussion of his compositional philosophies, and the important work *Signs, Games and Messages*.

Though the above literature does discuss some of Kurtág’s compositional philosophies, there exist only vague attempts at tying together the threads of these philosophies, the most convincing being Tom Service’s online article. In order to provide a clearer picture of the composer, and to allow for a more consistent understanding of his music, the links between Kurtág’s compositional philosophies as a whole must be understood. There are no writings, for example, which associate Kurtág’s proclivity for skewed symmetry with his fascination with brevity, and none which deal with these in the context of *Signs, Games and Messages*. Indeed, many authors appear to pay little attention to *Signs, Games and Messages*, a surprising fact given the work contains more individual pieces than any other work by Kurtág and is under constant revision and recomposition by the composer. Moreover, *Signs, Games and Messages* is not the only piece which has been overlooked by researchers: of the approximately 85 works by Kurtág, at least 40 have not been discussed in depth. *Signs, Games and Messages* is, however, for the reasons stated above, undeniably one of his more important works. The lack of research into this collection of works is the second of the two lacunae that this thesis will address.
Aims

The above literature review has identified two gaps in the research surrounding Kurtág, and this thesis will aim to address both of them. Seeking, furthermore to investigate the nexus between the philosophies and the music, using Signs, Games and Messages as a case study.

From this, the following aims can be determined:

1) To provide a comprehensive, integrated, survey of the compositional philosophies that inform the music of György Kurtág.

2) To discuss the defining elements of Kurtág’s musical language in some of his important works, particularly the viola set of Signs, Games and Messages.

3) To explicate the nexus between Kurtág’s compositional philosophies and his music.

4) To provide a more holistic view of Kurtág as a composer.

Methodology

In order to achieve the above aims, this thesis will employ two main methodologies.

The first methodology, which underpins chapter 2, will draw upon primary source material, most notably a set of three interviews that took place between Bálint András Varga, a music publisher, and both Márta and György Kurtág. These interviews are published in the book György Kurtág: Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages. The three interviews were published separately over three decades: the first from 1982-1985;

the second in 1996; and the third from 2007 to 2008. All interviews cover a wide range of topics and are probing in their content, and as such can be used as a firm foundation for any exploration of Kurtág’s life and music. Additionally, there is a 1996 documentary entitled *The Matchstick Man*[^30], in which the composer talks at length about his music and compositional philosophies. Utilising these primary sources is crucial to understanding the composer’s compositional philosophy, as well as his compositional approach and process.

Secondly, chapter 3 of this thesis will feature musical examples drawn primarily from *Signs, Games and Messages*, and also some of Kurtág’s other works as appropriate. These examples will serve to illustrate some of the essential features of Kurtág’s musical language, and how his language intersects with his philosophies. This more analytical aspect of the research will draw upon a number of writings and approaches to analysis including Josef Straus’ *An Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory*[^31], Nicholas Cook’s *A Guide to Musical Analysis*[^32], and Rudolph Reti’s *The Thematic Process in Music*[^33].


Chapter 2

Kurtág’s Compositional Philosophies and Approach

Many writers have commented on Kurtág’s compositional philosophies and the manifestation of these philosophies in his music. These writers, however, have tended to view Kurtág through a narrow lens, and in doing so they present a distorted image of the composer. This distortion can be seen most notably in the idea that Kurtág is attempting to communicate through his music - a concept first proposed by Rachel Beckles-Wilson, the respected authority on Kurtág. She wrote that Kurtág’s ‘whole understanding of music seems to spring from a concept of human communication’. However, this claim was denied three times by Kurtág himself during the third of three interviews (2007-08) with music publisher Bálint András Varga. The first time Kurtág was confronted with this notion of communication, his response was quite clear:

Varga: …for you, composition stems from a deep-seated desire to communicate rather than from the wish to realise a particular musical idea.

Kurtág: This is difficult…how shall I put it? Very little of it is conscious in any way. I am not aware of any intention to communicate.\(^{35}\)

The second time Varga questioned Kurtág on this issue came after the composer described in detail the story of the Colindă - a Romanian Christmas song which he included in his unfinished work Colindă-Balladă:

Varga: There is nothing abstract about this story either. There is a message in it that will have made you want to set it to music.

Kurtág : In any case, I am not aware of any conscious wish to want to communicate something.\(^{36}\)

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36 Ibid., p.40.
The third time Varga raised the subject, he pointed out that Kurtág, in his youth, used to distribute his scores like ‘leaflets’:

Varga: If you have nothing to communicate, you do not need those leaflets either.
Kurtág: It may have to do with my age, but basically I have not changed. I am not aware of any desire to communicate. In everyday life, I am a boring person, Márta has a dull time with me.\(^{37}\)

Eventually, after being questioned a fourth time, the composer yielded - though it was far from convincing and only came after a little nudging from an ever-perceptive Márta:

Varga: You mentioned earlier on how you had made *What Is the Word* a message. The notion, the gesture of message plays a major role in your work. Is there anything else you would like to say about it?
Kurtág: I cannot think of anything else at the moment.
Márta Kurtág: Well, didn’t you say you had no desire to communicate anything?
Varga: That is precisely why I feel, all the time, that you do. Of course, you do not sit at your desk and say: now, I am going to send a message. But that is what happens. it appears to be an urge that is deep-seated within you.
Kurtág: It appears so. In any case: away from the desk, I am rather dull.\(^{38}\)

Beckles-Wilson made her comments in 1998, nine years before the third interview was recorded; her misconception is understandable, then, in this context. Other authors, however, have taken Beckles-Wilson at her word without reviewing the evidence, and have perpetuated the misconception that Kurtág tries to communicate through his music, despite writing after the composer’s denial of this claim. To see Kurtág as a communicator is a seductively easy paradigm through which to understand his


\(^{38}\) Ibid., p.52.
compositional philosophies, however it does not address the totality of Kurtág as a composer or as a person. Indeed, few composers can be eloquently summed up in a single umbrella term such as human communication, and it is clear from these four, brief, exchanges between Varga and Kurtág that understanding the composer’s own conception of his music is not so straightforward. No writer, to date, has assembled the totality of Kurtág’s compositional philosophies, and it is only once this has taken place that a more satisfying understanding of Kurtág as a composer emerges.

A fascinating introduction to Kurtág’s compositional philosophies and approach lies in his close relationship with the visual arts. So close was this relationship that Kurtág himself noted: ‘I seem to have had something of a career as a visual artist…[my] drawings were even shown at an exhibition in Caen.’ In preparation for the second interview in 1996, Varga asked Kurtág to ‘draw his music’, to which the composer responded by providing three drawings. Two were highly similar in nature; the third was distinctly different from the others (see example 1). When Varga commented on the significant difference between the first two drawings and the third, Kurtág provided an interesting reflection on his compositional process:

Varga: The difference between the two kinds of drawings is astounding. It is as if one were the result of a conscious decision: this is how I see my music and this is how I want others to see it. The third drawing is a dream…a manifestation of the unconscious…

Kurtág: There is in fact a difference, but I wouldn’t call the first two drawings conscious: they are, rather, an automatic communication that captures the emotion of a moment. The difference is, I would say, that the third drawing is the maximum that I can achieve in the way of representing a human being. It is not a rendering of a specific

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object more than any other drawing. It is, rather, something of which I can say that it resembles something.\textsuperscript{40}

Moments later, Kurtág notes: '[These drawings] don’t really reflect my music; I’d prefer to say I would be happy if my music were like that.‘\textsuperscript{41} This comment suggests that Kurtág was able to achieve, in the act of drawing, a certain quality he sought, but had to this point failed to find, in music. Kurtág’s drawings might not have reflected his (then) current music, but they did reflect his ideal music. When trying to distill the essence of Kurtág as a composer, understanding his ideal music is, perhaps, a more valuable insight than understanding music with which he is not completely satisfied.


\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 15.
There are, then, two important concepts which were raised in this conversation: capturing and representing. These were perceived by Kurtág as two ways of expressing his unconscious impulses in his music, i.e. two compositional approaches. Capturing, is described by Kurtág as an attempt to ‘capture the emotion of a moment’. Representing, it seems, is a more literal approach to composition.

Another visual metaphor for Kurtág’s music can be found in his discussion of a different set of drawings which he described as ‘signs’ (see example 2). Though highly similar in nature to the drawings Varga asked Kurtág to produce to describe his music, these ‘signs’ were completed of Kurtág’s own volition during his early years as a composer in Paris, from 1957-58. He reflected that he ‘set down’ these signs during a tumultuous period of compositional paralysis, feeling that he was ‘no good for anything else’. During the second interview in 1996, Varga and Kurtág spoke about the musical equivalent of these signs:

Varga: You wish you could write music like that?
Kurtág: Uh-huh.
Varga: What would this music sound like?
Kurtág: …a single gesture, terribly virtuosic, terribly difficult, with everything superposed on top of each other, lasting not even a minute.

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42 It should be noted that though Kurtág uses the word ‘emotion’, a better word might be ‘atmosphere’. It is not possible to know the original Hungarian word used, but it is likely that ‘atmosphere’ is more precise and all encompassing than ‘emotion’, which would preclude any capturing of an idea which has no strong emotional content. In any case, it is impossible to exactly what emotion Kurtág might have been feeling when he has writes a piece such as …pas à pas - nulle part... or …step by step - nowhere..., the atmosphere, however, is much clearer.


44 Ibid.
Moments later, after Márta left the room to fetch an example of her husband’s drawings, Kurtág returned to the topic of signs:

Kurtág: I don’t know how many notebooks I filled with those signs…The bigger they got, the less interesting they became.

Varga: What is it that you really wanted to do?
Kurtág: I didn’t want to do anything, I didn’t want to express anything. When I did, there was a problem.45

Example 2: Three of Kurtág’s ‘signs’.

These two sets of drawings suggest that Kurtág’s artistic approach to drawing is similar to his approach to composition. He finds inspiration in his unconscious impulses, and approaches these impulses by either capturing or representing them. Furthermore, Kurtág’s discussion of his drawings strongly suggests the importance of the unconscious mind in his compositional approach.

Kurtág also spoke of the importance of the unconscious at other times in the Varga interviews. He twice noted, for example, that he would prefer not to write a piece if he is too aware of the intricacies of its proposed form. Indeed, he refrained from setting

three much-loved Beckett scenes to music because of the highly specific stage
directions which Beckett included in the manuscript, reflecting: ‘all I would have to do
is fill in the gaps.’  

Kurtág’s affinity with the unconscious extends beyond his role as an artist, and
into his everyday life. A very telling account of the importance of the unconscious in
Kurtág’s everyday life came when Kurtág noted: ‘My natural state is to sit and look at
nothing in particular. Márta will ask me what I’m thinking of. Nothing. I’m not in the
habit of thinking.’. Practitioners of Zen Buddhism, would be familiar with Kurtág’s
‘natural state’, and indeed it appears that Kurtág has some familiarity with Zen Buddhist
teachings. In a discussion of his compositional philosophies and their similarity to those
held by Daniel Barenboim, Márta Kurtág identified her husband’s affinity with Zen
Buddhism:

Barenboim tells his students a similar thing that is related to Gyuri’s [Kurtág’s] idea:
music does not begin when you start playing it and it continues to sound after you have
stopped. Gyuri finds it extremely important that something should begin. This is a Zen-
Buddhist aspect of his thinking: he says it does not begin there, but also that it should
begin. The harmony of diametrically opposed ideas.

It is in this mode of thought that connections between Kurtág and composers such
as John Cage become apparent: Cage was committed to the philosophy and practice of
Zen Buddhism. Though there are some clear differences between much of Cage’s and
Kurtág’s work, Cage’s conception of his piece 4’33” (1959) shares a striking similarity

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47 Ibid., p. 32.
48 Ibid., p. 55.
to Kurtág’s compositional philosophies. 4’33’’, far from being a piece dedicated to silence as is widely purported, asks the audience to be mindful of the present moment and to pay attention to the sounds of the environment around them. When Varga asked Kurtág of the effect of such sounds upon him, he responded:

> For years it was a tremendous experience for me to hear the first song of the blackbird in spring…Generally I live on extremely brief impressions - three minutes or five at the seashore or on the cliffs of Prussia Cove. That was all I had…but those three minutes - those were real.\(^{49}\)

This still, quiet, and receptive mental state is reminiscent of Zen Buddhist meditation and the concept of ‘mindfulness’ in which the meditator becomes aware of the present moment. Furthermore, there is a strand of Zen Buddhist meditation in which sound - often in the form of a mantra or gong-like instruments - becomes the object of focus, which in turn promotes a quiet and receptive mental state. Not only does this appear to resonate with Kurtág’s accounts of his own ‘natural state’, but his music is often highly meditative in nature. *Grabstein für Stephan* (1979-1989), for example, begins with a hypnotic series of rhythmical chords strummed by the guitar, supported by extremely soft and reverberant percussion, then echoed by the harp and strings. The effect of such a piece can certainly be described as meditative (see appendix A, ex. 1 and appendix B, ex. 1).

*Grabstein for Stephan* illustrates the musical result of Kurtág’s compositional approach to his unconscious impulses. In so much as it ‘captures’ a meditative state, *Grabstein for Stephan* could be seen to demonstrate the capturing compositional approach. At the same time, however, it could also be seen as a ‘representation’: the title

refers to a gravestone for Stephan Stein, husband of Marianne Stein who helped to lift Kurtág from his depression in the late 1950s. It seems, then, that Kurtág’s compositional approach is more nuanced than the visual metaphors, and Kurtág’s commentary, might suggest: he may choose to both capture and represent in the same piece, in varying proportions and in different features.

Kurtág’s evocative titles are the most obvious suggestion of which of these two approaches he might be taking in a piece. For example, …*pas à pas - nulle part*… (1993-97) or …*step by step - nowhere*… strongly suggests an attempt to capture an emotion. *Hommage à Robert Schumann* (1990), however, strongly suggests an attempt to represent an idea of Schumann. Indeed, *Hommage à Robert Schumann* is one of many works by Kurtág whose titles seek to represent an idea of a person using the title ‘hommage à…’. There are at least 70 such compositions with the title ‘hommage à…’, and numerous other works which do not include a reference to a composer in the title, but do reference their music explicitly in the score.

Kurtág also seeks to represent particular ideas in his titles. A memorable example of this is his frequent use of the word ‘virág’ or ‘flower’. In the first book of *Játékok* alone, there are eight pieces which use the word ‘virág’: seven of these are titled ‘virág az ember’ or ‘flowers we are’. The first of these seven is further titled ‘flowers we are, frail flowers’ and the final one is titled ‘and once more: Flowers we are’. Though there is an obvious connection between the transience of flowers and the transience of human life, this could also be a reference to Kurtág’s conception that ‘harmony is melody
pressed like a flower’, or to his collection of pressed flowers of which he ‘was very fond, when [he] was eleven or twelve years old’.\(^{50}\)

It is clear, then, from the foregoing discussion that Kurtág places a great deal of importance on his unconscious mind, which is the wellspring from which his compositional impulses flow. These impulses appear to be expressed in capturing the emotion of a moment and/or in representing a particular person or idea. The compositional process through which these are realised is centred around three key approaches which will be discussed in the next section: self-repetition, revision and self-reflection.

**Compositional process: self-repetition, revision and self-reflection**

Self-repetition is discussed in great depth by Sylvia Grmela, who writes extensively on this topic in her doctoral thesis. She proposes that ‘Kurtág’s musical language contains layers of memories, which results in a music filled with references to the musical past and present…’, and labels this as ‘recollection’ or ‘recall’. Grmela goes on to note that Kurtág ‘has said that when he writes a musical passage with which he is satisfied, he accepts it as a gift, incorporating it into his language…and feels free to distribute it throughout his works.’\(^{51}\) Grmela’s categorisations and discussion of Kurtág’s self-repetition is exhaustive and useful. However, she frames Kurtág as a collector of ideas; once he has found an idea, he keeps it forever, using it again and

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again but never developing it. Though Grmela is not wrong, there is further nuance to the concept of self-repetition in Kurtág’s compositional process.

The concept of self-repetition is raised twice by Varga over his three interviews: in the 1982-1985 interview and again in 1996. In the 1982-1985 interview, Varga asked Kurtág: 'How important is the problem of self-repetition for you in your own works?’, to which the composer responded:

It’s important, important. I often forget about pieces that have already been written, and it does happen that I discover the same thing all over again … One is always coming back to certain problems. Right now, for instance, I feel like returning to a major chord and repeating it over and over again … so one keeps on returning, from time to time, to an identical piece of material in order to map out new possibilities inherent in it.52

In the same interview, Kurtág also cautions against thinking that pieces by the same composer which sound alike were written with the same idea in mind, citing J.S. Bach as a prime example of this. Kurtág cautions that ‘one has to be very careful about saying of someone, fifty or even a hundred years later, that he was doing the same thing, or that he went down certain avenues in the same manner.’. 53

In the 1996 interview, however, it seems Kurtág has become less certain in this view. When Varga again asks about the ‘problem of self-repetition’, and its relevance to him ten years later, Kurtág’s response is erratic and confused. ‘I’m just beginning to perceive it as a problem’, he responds, before devolving into a stream of consciousness, in which the phrases ‘I don’t know’ and ‘I’m not so sure’ frequently appear. There is,

53 Ibid., p. 10.
however, a common thread: the idea of freshness. Kurtág spoke of a few pieces which he did not want performed because he felt they were not ‘fresh’. He goes on to say: ‘… it’s a good thing I’m forgetful. Since I no longer remember having written a certain passage, it stays fresh in spite of being literally repeated. But I’m not so sure anymore, even of this. Maybe it doesn’t stay fresh. I don’t know.’.

One can hear the anguish in Kurtág’s voice when he makes comments like this. Indeed, it appears that both Varga and Mártat Kurta also sense this anguish, as they repeatedly try to help the composer in describing exactly what he means. The most helpful of these interjections comes from Martá, who says: ‘In the memorable words of Rimma: “the trouble is that I’m not writing my selected poems, just poems as they come”’. What she means by this is that not all of Kurtág’s works will be masterpieces as he writes them - he needs to refine the idea through many repetitions. Self-repetition, then, seems to be a concept which is both intrinsic to his compositional process and a source of great anxiety for Kurtág.

The second concept found within Kurtág’s compositional process is revision. It is normal for most composers to revise their works. Kurtág’s process of revision, however, can often be extremely arduous. For example, Kurta remarked upon the problems he encountered whilst preparing the piano and voice edition of Samuel Beckett: What is the Word - one of his longer and better known works. Towards the end of preparing this new edition, Kurtág noticed that he had accidentally omitted two lines of Beckett’s text and had no explanation for his oversight. He felt that even though the piece was better


55 Ibid.
proportioned without these lines, he simply could not leave them out. As a result, over
the next fifteen years, he rewrote every strophe of the *What is the Word*, twice. The first
time, he composed the strophe from beginning to end; the second time he focused on
‘writing it the way [he] had wanted to, years earlier’ and ‘only then did the piece move
on.’ To put this revision in perspective, the average length of each strophe of the
original Beckett text is four words, the maximum is nine. As a result of omitting, at
most, nine words, he spent the next fifteen years rewriting the entire piece - **twice**. This
piece is also one of Kurtág’s longer works, with an average performance time of fifteen
minutes. This was an unusually strong reaction to a relatively minor problem.

Self-repetition and revision are related, yet distinct concepts. Self-repetition is
Kurtág’s process of dealing with the same unconscious impulse in a *new* piece, and
revision is his way of re-examining an impulse within the *same* piece. Both concepts
frame Kurtág’s compositional process as a search for the musical means to express his
unconscious impulses. Indeed, Kurtág describes his compositional process as: ‘I look
for a note and, perhaps, I will eventually find it. I may fail. Perhaps the piece is nothing
more than the attempt to find it.’

Comments such as these point to the third of the three defining compositional
processes: self-reflection. The term ‘self-reflection’ is distinctly different from the term
‘reflection’: one can certainly reflect upon ideas which are not concerned with
themselves. In this thesis, the term ‘self-reflection’ will refer to Kurtág’s tendency to
ruminate upon his own thoughts. Kurtág’s responses to many of Varga’s questions

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56 B.A. Varga, (trans. and ed.) György Kurtág: *Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages* (Rochester:
University of Rochester Press, 2009), p.29.

57 Ibid., p. 49.
suggests that he constantly engages in this kind of self-reflection on his music and compositional process:

The older I get, the clearer it is to me that my whole life constitutes a unity. Monteverdi is just as much part of it as Bartok or Webern…One of my basic goals as a composer has been to create a unity out of these disparate influences.\(^{58}\)

Where self-repetition and revision essentially form the ‘what’ and/or ‘how’ of Kurtag’s compositional process, self-reflection - and the understanding gained - is the ‘why’:

I like to teach because it forces me to think, or rather, it sets off a mechanism and I learn some very interesting things about my own thought. I never think if I have free time. I will study or do something, but I can’t just think. I can, though, when I teach or when composing is going really well.\(^{59}\)

I understand real music only if I teach it. Even if I listen to it or play it myself, it is not the same. I discover much more in working and trying to find out, for others, how to approach [a piece]. Simply, I love music and I want to understand.\(^{60}\)

Though all the questions asked of Kurtag necessarily lead him to self-reflect during the interview itself, the content of his answers also points to his tendency to self-reflect at other times. Indeed, almost all his thoughts on the importance of his unconscious mind point to Kurtag being highly self-reflective, his aforementioned comments about the three minutes spent at Prussia Cove before having to teach, being one example.


\(^{59}\) Ibid., p.155.

The above discussion has set out Kurtág’s compositional philosophies (the importance of his unconscious mind), his compositional approach (capture and representation of his unconscious impulses), and his compositional process (self-repetition, revision, self-reflection). The discussion of his compositional process in particular suggests that when Kurtág reflects upon his music, he is also reflecting upon himself. In this self-reflection, and in his teaching and composing in particular, it appears that he learns a great deal about himself.
Chapter 3

Defining Elements of Kurtág’s Musical Language

This section of the thesis will examine the way in which Kurtág’s compositional philosophies, approach and process manifest themselves in his musical language. As noted earlier, Kurtág’s compositional approach is focused on two concepts: capturing the emotion of a moment, and representing a particular person or idea. The defining elements of Kurtág’s musical language in this section will therefore be grouped according to whether they serve mainly to ‘capture’ or ‘represent’.

Musical Language as Capturing

The first group of defining elements to be discussed will be those which serve mainly to capture. There are six such elements: brevity, gesture, non-development, skewed symmetry, the ‘objet trouvé’ and the musical diary approach. The final two elements are closely related and will therefore be included in the same section.

Brevity

Brevity is a device which Kurtág uses mainly to capture a moment, and is one of the most recognisable features of his works; he rarely writes a single continuous piece that lasts more than five minutes.\(^{61}\) Though Kurtág’s respect and enthusiasm for Webern’s miniatures is well-known, Kurtág does not share Webern’s ‘almost scientific’ approach to this form.\(^{62}\) A similar view is held by Tom Service:

\(^{61}\) Many of Kurtág’s works are collections of very short pieces, and therefore the total duration of these works can be much longer than five minutes, however these individual pieces are often on the order of seconds.

Kurtág’s apparent obsession with this smallness of time-scale isn't some kind of post-Webernian quest to split the musical atom or to find the structural essence of music. Far from a ‘reduction’, Kurtág's fragments are about musical and, above all, expressive intensification: maximising the effect and impact of every note, every gesture.63

In order to achieve this ‘expressive intensification’ – which Kurtag himself referred to as ‘capturing a moment', he employs the miniature form. Stephen Argosh notes that ‘brevity…capitalises on the ability of the listener to retain an impression of the entire work in the memory, and to reflect backwards over it in the moments of silence that follow.’ 64 It is logical to conclude that a moment cannot be captured in a piece which lasts a long time.

Though brevity can be found in almost all of Kurtág’s works, ‘Four Entwined Bodies - to the exhibition of Sári Gerloczy’ from Signs, Games and Messages encapsulates Argosh’s point extremely well (see appendix A, ex. 2). ‘Four Entwined Bodies - to the exhibition of Sári Gerloczy’ is the twelfth piece in the solo viola set of Signs, Games and Messages and is quite transparent in its construction. The four phrases, purposefully arranged as four systems, are no doubt a direct representation of the entwined bodies which are a defining feature in many of Gerloczy’s works. It is, however, the simplicity of these phrases and their extreme shortness which is of particular interest in the present discussion. Each phrase seeks to express only as much as it needs to, and in doing so captures the immediacy and rawness of Gerloczy’s paintings. As Argosh notes, the silence in between each phrase allows the listener to


process the totality of the music they have just heard. Together with the simplicity of the interspersed musical material, this silence can evokes a very strong emotional reaction and it is this combination of simplicity and brevity, particularly the latter, which is a hallmark of Kurtág’s work.

**Gestural Language**

Though the use of melodic material, as in ‘Four Entwined Bodies’, is not uncommon in Kurtág’s oeuvre, more common is his use of a highly gestural language to capture the emotion of a moment. An example of this language, like brevity, can be found in almost any of Kurtág’s works, an early example being the String Quartet op. 1 (see example 3). This piece was written after Marianne Stein encouraged Kurtág to focus on the possibilities present in a single gesture and, given the profound effect Stein had on Kurtág during their meetings, it is no surprise that a highly gestural language has remained a central part of his musical language.

Example 3: Extract from the first movement of the String Quartet op. 1.

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An example of Kurtág’s gestural musical language from *Signs, Games and Messages* is ‘Vagdalkozós’ or ‘Flapping-Slapping’. Both the title of this piece and the musical language suggest a physical gesture, and even a brief look at the score will show the extent of this gesture (see appendix A, ex. 3). There three main gestures in this piece: a molto crescendo motif, a pizzicato motif and a ‘menacing’ up and downward glissando motif. These are contained within two large phrases, followed by a quasi-coda. These gestures are unreserved in their expressivity, and require a significant amount of physical gesture from the performer.

Physical gesture in performance is also of great importance to Kurtág. One performance direction in particular highlights this point: the direction ‘estarren’ or ‘petrified’, which Varga correctly identifies as a stage direction. Kurtág says of this term:

I stole that from the Darmstadt composers…It is there in almost all of my compositions. I [refer] to the silent scene in *The Inspector General*. It has a fantastic revolutionary idea: the real Inspector General turns up and everyone stops as if petrified in the pose he or she happens to be in. In my song⁶⁶, I make a direct reference to that scene.⁷

A further example of physical gesture in Kurtág’s music can be found in *Signs, Games and Messages*. ‘Virág - Zsigmondy Dénesnek: … in memoriam Anneliese Nissen-Zsigmondy’ contains the direction: ‘Don’t stop the continuity of the very slow

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⁶⁶ The song Kurtág is referring to is one of two unpublished ‘Russian’ songs set to words by Daniil Kharms. Kurtág refers to the scene from *The Inspector General* in the second of these songs, which was a birthday present to Anatol Vieru - a Romanian composer and music pedagogue.

bow movements. The up-bow should fill out the rest a [sic] psychophysical preparation

to the next groaning down-bow sound.’ (see example 4).

The up-bows Kurtág refers to are placed over rests, and therefore a performer
must make a circle with their bow. The up-bow portion of the circle is silent and the
down-bow portion is the groaning sound to which Kurtág refers. The technical
performance of this piece does not require a musician to make the movement Kurtág
asks, and it might be deemed histrionic by some. The gesture of this direction does,
however, make a difference to the emotion of the moment. A still up-bow movement
suggests suspense, uncertainty, petrification. A purposeful, moving up-bow suggests the
inevitable regularity of a funeral march - an idea Kurtág uses in his piece Stele (see
appendix B, ex.2).

Though Kurtág is not the first composer to utilise gesture as opposed to melody or
harmony as the principal musical material of a piece, to this day gesture remains
somewhat of a novelty in Western Art Music. Indeed, gestural musical material creates a
very different listening experience for most audiences, who might be expecting the long
melodic lines of the Common Practice Period. A gestural musical language sets up an
environment which challenges the very fundamentals of the way music is heard. In combination with physical and theatrical gesture, this helps to capture the emotion of the moment.

Non-development

Another common expectation for most audiences is the notion that musical material should develop in an organic and discernible way. Kurtág frequently subverts this expectation by choosing to develop his material in only the most basic fashion, to the point that the term ‘development’ may no longer apply. When there does appear to be some relationship between adjacent ideas, these relationships are often tenuous and vague. Given that this is development only in the loosest possible sense of the word, this section will use the term ‘non-development’.

‘Jelek I’ from Signs, Games and Messages is an excellent example of non-development. Consisting of nine aurally-distinct motifs contained within five less-audible phrases, ‘Jelek I’ shows the way in which Kurtág creates a sense of continuity between gestures without resorting to traditional forms of development (see appendix A, ex. 4). Each motif occurs at least twice in direct succession and is vaguely, but detectably, related to its surrounding motifs. An example of this can be found in bars 7-11, which feature an increase in note density: the semiquavers become a trill, which becomes a tremolo between notes, which becomes a double stop tremolo, which then becomes a sustained double stop. This progression serves only to create unity within the
diversity of language, i.e. an over-arching form.\textsuperscript{68} There is always some conscious ordering, and that conscious ordering gives a sense of continuity to a piece which is not necessarily development.

Another example of this conscious ordering, which can be described as non-development, is found in ‘Hommage à John Cage’, also from Signs, Games and Messages (see appendix A, ex. 5). This piece consists of six lines, which seem to roughly descend in pitch content until the fourth line, at which point it begins again from the A string of the viola, descending until the final few notes. These lines also tend to increase in length over time. This is an over-arching form. Apart from the negligible sense of conclusion, this piece would suffer very little if the order of these lines were rearranged; there would simply be a different form. Traditional development, however, \textit{would} suffer immensely if one were to rearrange the order of its ideas. ‘Hommage à John Cage’, therefore exhibits some continuity between ideas which can also be described as non-developmental.

That non-development serves to capture, rather than represent, can also be found in “Virág - Zsigmondy Dénesnek: … in memoriam Anneliese Nissen-Zsigmondy’ (1994, rev. 2005) (A flower for Dénes Zsigmondy) (see appendix A, ex. 6). This expressive, yet desolate, memorial piece features two main motifs: a ‘groan’ motif (systems 1, 2, 3 and 5 ) which quickens in the third system, and is interrupted by a

\textsuperscript{68} It is important to note that ‘form’ in this context does not refer to the traditional music theory term, which is used in the context of ternary ‘form’ or binary ‘form’. Indeed, form in the context of ternary ‘form’ is a relatively imprecise term as it refers to a \textit{structure}, not a \textit{form}. Form, in its truest and original philosophical sense, is a more abstract term referring to the totality of an object or idea: its perceived impact, shape, configuration - simply, the way it \textit{is}. Over-arching form, then, refers to the total aural impact of a piece of music, not its structure which, in some cases, might even be inaudible.
serene ‘choral’ motif (system 4), after which the groan motif returns in the final system of the piece. Not withstanding the expression marking of ‘mesto’ or ‘sad’, Kurtág’s grief and sadness at the death of his friend’s wife can be easily heard throughout this work. The lack of any significant development is a key factor in allowing Kurtág to directly capture the stagnant, desolate feeling of his grief.

**Skewed Symmetry**

Related to the idea of non-development is a feature of Kurtág’s music that Mika Pelo describes as ‘skewed symmetry’, which Pelo describes as having particular importance in Stele, Kurtág’s largest piece for orchestra: ‘…it was constructed by deliberately disturbing symmetrical chords in order to achieve a special atmosphere, one of serenity and other-worldliness’. Skewed symmetry allows Kurtág to use well-known historical forms and/or devices, such as ternary form, by noticeably altering a key component of that form or device in order to cast them in a new light. In the third interview cited previously, Kurtág recognised that his use of form stems from the traditional periodic thinking of the classical era:

Varga: … a fundamental feature of your music [is] the contrast between forte and piano, the immediate succession of the energetic and the tender.

Kurtág: From this point of view, it is completely traditional. Without there being eight-measure periods, periodic thinking continues to function.

Varga: To approach it from a different angle: question and answer in music are a basic concept of yours.

Kurtág: Those are what I mean by periods. It is the most traditional way of thinking.\(^{70}\)

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Kurtág’s comment, ‘without there being eight-measure periods, periodic thinking continues to function’ alludes to the presence of traditional structures which have been altered - skewed - in some way. An example of this is ‘Samuel Beckett: Le nain’, the fifteenth piece in the viola set of *Signs, Games and Messages* (see appendix A, ex.7). This piece was originally found in a much larger piece for voice, percussion and string trio, …*pas à pas - nulle part…: poèmes de Samuel Beckett*, and has been altered in form as well as in instrumentation. In *Signs, Games and Messages*, this piece contains five phrases. The first two are highly similar, the third acts as a quasi-coda for the first two phrases, the fourth is significantly different in melodic content, and the fifth returns to the wide-ranging leaps of the first three phrases. An element of skewed symmetry can be seen in the inclusion of the third phrase. If this were not included, the overall structure would be very simple: a contrasting double period. A contrasting double period consists of two halves: an antecedent and a consequent, each of which contain two phrases. If the first phrase of the consequent is contrasting to the first phrase of the antecedent, then it is a contrasting double period. This is the structure of ‘Samuel Beckett: le nain’, without the third phrase. This short, nebulous, phrase destabilises the overall structure as soon as it is heard, and is exemplar of Kurtág’s wider tendency to skew symmetrical patterns in his works. In addition to the creative scordatura, the extremely wide-ranging leaps of the melody and the use of a metallic practice mute, skewed symmetry helps to eschew traditional expectations without completely abandoning the unifying structure that traditional periodic thinking provides. In doing so, Kurtág is able to capture the bizarre atmosphere of the Beckett poem, which describes a ninety-year-old dwarf who, on his death bed, requests that he be given a full-sized coffin, ‘for God’s sake’.
The ‘Objet Trouvé’ and Musical Diary Approach

Kurtág frequently comments on the importance of natural sounds in his music. This includes not only the sounds of nature, but also the natural sounds of musical instruments. A related feature of Kurtág’s compositions is the ‘objet trouvé’ or ‘found object’. This is a technique in which Kurtág recontextualises the most basic, natural sounds of an instrument - the open strings of string instrument family, or the natural decay of a piano - in order to cast that particular sound in a new light. Kurtág writes of a piece composed with this technique:

There was barely any need for a composer to create this piece. I call this type of music objet trouvés, giving them dignity and artistic value in the same way we accept a stone or a sculpture in a frame.

Grmela writes that Kurtág’s use of ‘objet trouvés’ was influenced by the concept of ‘readymade’ art, first described in the visual arts. Readymade art was first introduced by Marcel Duchamp in 1913 when he placed an upside-down bicycle wheel on a kitchen stool and presented it at an exhibition. Duchamp said of this exhibit ‘… ordinary objects [can be] made into art simply by changing their context - that is, by exhibiting them as art’.


This notion of placing the natural sounds of an instrument in a new context could certainly be described as capturing. It seems that in the same way Kurtág seeks to capture the emotions of a moment in as raw a manner as possible, he also attempts to draw attention to the most basic sounds of instruments, and remove any undue extraneous influence - even his own.

Related to the objet trouvé is a compositional approach found in Kurtág’s works, the ‘musical diary’. It is first employed within the context of Játékok:

I hardly ever dismissed a single idea…I added other ‘snapshots’, just like a musical diary in which I could jot down just what came into my mind.\(^{75}\)

The evidence of this approach in Játékok is striking: there are five books, each containing at approximately 25-30 individual pieces. These are some of Kurtág’s shortest, most visceral, works, and there is a distinct sense when one listens to, or plays through, the books that they were indeed written in the manner of a diary. This sense no doubt stems from the evocative and simplistic titles Kurtág employs, which feature no apparent order or connection. For example, he moves immediately from a homage to Verdi to a graphically-notated piece called ‘Walking’, then to ‘C’s Night Song’ (a piece consisting only of the note ‘C’), then to a ‘Little Chorale’. He also returns constantly to the same ideas, usually of physical process such as walking, toddling or crawling but also to ideas of a more philosophical nature, such as the aforementioned ‘Flowers we are’.

This same sense of a musical diary can be found in *Signs, Games and Messages*. One piece in particular is an example of both an objet trouvé and the musical diary approach: the ‘Perpetuum Mobile’ (see appendix A, ex. 8). The objet trouvé in this piece is clearly apparent: it is the open strings of the viola. Not only does this piece use the open strings almost exclusively, but in moments when Kurtág deviates from the open strings he retains the same harmonic palette of consecutive 5ths/4ths - in other words, he extends the open strings sonority. Kurtág’s musical diary approach in this piece is also unmistakable. There are three versions of the ‘Perpetuum Mobile’, each of which features only the slightest variation from the previous one. Furthermore, there are indications in the score which suggest that a performer should only play one of the versions in concert, not all three. There are a number of speculative reasons as to why Kurtág might have included three versions, however the important point to note is that he chose to include all of them - not just the final version, which is an almost perfect amalgam of the first two. Even if Kurtág had not already raised the idea of a diary, the inclusion of these three pieces could still be considered, at the very least, a record of his compositional process.

The common factor between these six elements of Kurtág’s musical language - brevity, gesture, non-development, skewed symmetry, the ‘objet trouvé’ and the musical diary approach - is, therefore, clear: they are all directly related to his desire to capture the emotion of a moment.
Musical Language as Representing

There are two defining elements of Kurtág’s musical language which serve mainly to represent his unconscious impulses: the diversity of his music language, and his use of specific intervals.

Diverse musical language

Given the number of composers whom Kurtág tries to represent through his homages, and the wide range of emotion he tries to capture, his use of a diverse musical language seems inevitable. Within the key features discussed above, Kurtág’s use of pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony - some of the fundamental building blocks of music - can be quite varied. For example, in Hommage à Mihály András: 12 Microludes for String Quartet, there are consecutive movements which are completely different in conception and construction (see example 5). The fourth movement is a pointilistic Webern-inspired work, which heavily features the tonally-disorienting intervals of a minor second and major seventh. In contrast, the fifth movement is firmly rooted in tonality and shows the clear influence of Hungarian folksong. These two movements are further distinguished by the way in which the instruments are treated. The fourth movement treats all four instruments as one single line, whilst the fifth is rooted in a more traditional string quartet conception: the first violin carries the melody, the second violin supports the first, and the lower parts provide the harmonic foundation. Indeed, so contrasting are these works that even a brief view of the score highlights their difference:
Further examples of Kurtág’s diverse musical language are the last two pieces of *Signs, Games and Messages* for viola: ‘… eine Blume für Tabea …’, and ‘Kroó György in memoriam’ (see appendix A, ex. 9 and 10). These two works are highly divergent: the first uses a sparkling, delicate language reminiscent of Salvatore Sciarrino, and the second evokes the pathos and melodic simplicity of Arvo Pärt’s music. Though these composers may not have directly influenced these pieces, the resemblance is nonetheless striking. Furthermore, the disparity in these two composer’s styles shows the wide range of language Kurtág is capable of absorbing into his own whilst still remaining fundamentally consistent in his compositional approach.

*Kurtág’s use of specific intervals*

Despite his insistence that he has ‘no know-how or technique’, Kurtág does speak about certain foundational elements of his technique. When asked about his inclination towards certain intervals, particularly the minor second, Kurtág said that he ‘needed a
neutralising medium’. A ‘neutralising medium’ likely refers to the minor second’s lack of any significant harmonic function compared to, for example, the perfect fifth. When used in quick succession, the minor second allows Kurtág to ‘neutralise’ any harmonic hierarchy in a manner not dissimilar to the Second Viennese school. Indeed, this interval was also favoured by Webern - a composer Kurtág holds in great esteem. In making intervals equal (not necessarily employing all twelve notes of the chromatic scale), and thereby ‘neutralising’ any harmonic function, Kurtág is able to draw focus towards the gesture of his music. The fourth movement of Hommage à Mihály András: 12 Microludes for String Quartet (see appendix A, ex. 11 & appendix B, ex.3) exemplifies this effect: in using minor seconds and major sevenths, Kurtág removes any possibility of tension or release and smooths out the form, which draws attention towards the singular, unbroken, nature of the line which winds through all four parts of the string quartet. Though it is certainly possible that Kurtág is not fully aware of the meaning of every note he writes, his choice to use certain intervals is no mistake, especially when they are placed in a position of prominence.

Another example of an interval which is used with care and precision, and often holds prominence in Kurtág’s works, is the perfect fifth. It carries a special meaning in Kurtág’s music, which he describes in an interview with Varga:

The perfect fifth is another preferred interval: it is a symbol of purity if it occurs in a context where it appears as a novelty…they are always present on the open strings as well, but they are of less significance.

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73 Ibid., p.68.
An example of the purity of the perfect fifth can be found in ‘Virág - Zsigmondy Dénesnek: … in memoriam Anneliese Nissen-Zsigmondy', the twenty-first piece of Signs, Games and Messages (see appendix A, ex. 6). The fourth line of this work, labelled ‘choral’ is, in Kurtág’s words, a ‘sweet and simple’ moment in an otherwise discordant and disturbing piece. One can certainly hear the contrasting purity of these intervals, which begin with the open strings then move towards fourths which function as inverted consecutive fifths.

The minor second and the perfect fifth are the only intervals mentioned by Kurtág in his interviews. Though he does use all other intervals, these are the two which he mentions when asked if specific intervals have meaning for him. In his discussion, the minor second seems to aid the capturing of an idea by flattening the harmonic topography of a work. When Kurtág speaks about the perfect fifth, he explains that in certain contexts, the perfect fifth serves as a ‘symbol’ - a representation - of purity.

In isolation, these defining elements are not unique to Kurtág. Furthermore, the way he uses them is not unusual: composers for many centuries have used the perfect fifth as a symbol of purity, for example. These wide-ranging, and individually distinctive, elements of his musical language should, by all accounts, culminate in a post-modern juxtaposition of styles and influences. That Kurtág is able to unify his influences into a style that is fundamentally consistent, yet bears the distinctive mark of his musical predecessors, is testament to the composer’s great skill and expertise. Despite sounding quite different at times, Kurtág’s works almost always carry a sense that they are distinctly ‘Kurtág’. Indeed, after Varga asked Kurtág, and many other composers, to draw their music, Varga showed the unlabelled drawings to Austrian
sculptor and painter, Alfred Hrdlicka: ‘He did not know any of the composers and could examine the pictures objectively. Without hesitating for a second, Hrdlicka singled out Kurtág’s ‘insects’ for their element of concentration.’ 78

Conclusion

Kurtág’s compositional philosophies are wide-ranging and complex. The existing literature tends to view these philosophies in isolation and therefore cannot provide a holistic view of Kurtág as a composer. This thesis aimed to address this gap in two ways: by providing a survey of Kurtág’s compositional philosophies, and through a discussion of the defining elements of his musical language as manifested in his compositions.

Central to this thesis was a reexamination of the interviews which took place between Bálint András Varga and Kurtág over a period of 26 years. In reexamining these interviews, a different view of Kurtág’s compositional philosophies, approach and process was proposed. This view lies in contrast to the view held by Rachel Beckles-Wilson that Kurtág tries to communicate through his music, a view which the composer himself denies. After examination of Kurtág’s interviews, it appears that his compositional philosophies revolve around the importance he places on his unconscious impulses, and his broad approach towards composition is to capture and/or represent these impulses. Furthermore, his compositional process seems to be centred around three key concepts: self-repetition, reflection and self-reflection.

In order to understand the manifestation of Kurtág’s compositional philosophies, approach and process in his music, the defining elements of his musical language were discussed, focussing in particular on the viola set of Signs, Games and Messages - a work which has been examined in only the most superficial manner in previous research. These defining elements were shown either to capture or to represent his
unconscious impulses, and some - such as his use of specific intervals - appeared to both capture and represent. This discussion served to explicate the nexus between Kurtág’s compositional philosophies and his music, thereby providing a more holistic view of Kurtág as a composer.

Throughout this examination of Kurtág’s compositional philosophies, there has been a common theme which transcends the various pockets of thought and discussion. In everything Kurtág does, he appears to be focused on examining his own human condition, that is, his place in the world, and his relationship with it. In his compositional philosophies, he ruminates upon his own thoughts. In his compositional approach, he endeavours to capture the human emotions and atmosphere of a moment, or represent his perceptions of other people. In his compositional process, he constantly engages in self-reflection. It is rare for Kurtág to engage with themes which do not focus on the human condition.

It is easy to see why Rachel Beckles-Wilson might have called this human communication. There is a distinct difference, however. It seems that Kurtág seeks to understand himself and his own condition, and indeed, he teaches his students to engage in the same process of self-reflection:

I do not like people to be dead sure of what they want. I should like to teach them to wait before they decide they know. They should learn to to think before making a decision.79

Though his works do communicate after the fact, his intention in creating them does not appear to stem from a desire to communicate. Rather, in the same way that he takes other composer’s works and treats them as own, Kurtág expects musicians to take his music and use it as a catalyst for examining their own condition. In other words, he does not communicate, but rather allows another person to engage in the same self-reflection that he underwent whilst composing. This is, perhaps, why he never taught composition, but did teach piano and chamber music: for Kurtág, composition is a deeply personal pursuit which stems from his unconscious mind and therefore his compositional process cannot be taught to another. Performance, however, Kurtág approaches as an outsider: he must find the meaning in another composer’s work. This, he feels, is a task he can teach. Further research might examine Kurtág’s complex views on the teaching and performance of both his own works, and of other composers.

There is an extract from the interviews with Varga which captures Kurtág’s overall artistic approach - both in composition and performance - and his profound commitment to his craft. This extract serves as an appropriate conclusion to this thesis:

Varga: Why do musicians have so much difficulty understanding your music, even though your intentions seem to me so clear?
Kurtág : It is not my music they cannot fathom - it is music as such! It is not because of me that I am desperate. It is all about music! Music!
Márta Kurtág : Perhaps when it comes to Kurtág, conductors may think that the composer ought to be happy that they conduct his music at all. The same is true of violinist, even major ones. Apparently they say to themselves that those few notes should be easy to play, they cannot see what all the fuss is about. If they lack dedication, the determination to understand what is behind the notes…

Kurtág :….if they cannot channel their impulses…

Márta Kurtág :…then nothing will come out of it.\textsuperscript{81}

References Cited


Appendix A: Musical Examples

Example 1: Bars 1-8 of *Grabstein für Stephan.*
Example 2: ‘Four Entwined Bodies: to the exhibition of Sári Gerloczy’ from *Signs, Games and Messages.*

Четыре сплетённых тела ...
*Gerłóczy Sári kiállítására*

*zur ausstellung von Sári Gerłóczy to the exhibition of Sári Gerłóczy*
Example 3: ‘Vagdalkozós (Flapping-Slapping)’ from Signs, Games and Messages.

Vagdalkozós

Zerren-reissen
Flapping-slapping

Vivo, feroce

molto [trappo] expr.
[quasi Wa-wa]

molto pressato,
ravvò
[csányán szóljon]∗

pppp
kapart
hang∗∗

1987. IV.
rev. 1991. VII. II

∗ soll tieflich klingen /ugly sound
∗∗ gekratzt /scraping sound
Example 4: ‘Jelek I’ from *Signs, Games and Messages.*
Example 5: ‘Hommage à John Cage’ from *Signs, Games and Messages*.

*Hommage à John Cage*

Elakadó szavak

Stockende Worte

Faltering words

*per Viola*

*Molto moderato [p - 132-126]*

*p, poco dolce*

*stockende Worte*

Faltering words

*p, come prima*

*stockende Worte*

Faltering words

*meno p, poco a poco dim. e cantando*

*stockende Worte*

Faltering words

*La pause molto vaganti - irregolari. I gruppi sono di giusti.*

Z. 14 221
Example 7: ‘Samuel Beckett: le nain’ from Signs, Games and Messages.
Example 8: ‘Perpetuum Mobile’ from *Signs, Games and Messages* (versions a, b and c).
Example 9: ‘…eine Blume für Tabea…’ from *Signs, Games and Messages*.

... eine Blume für Tabea ...
Example 10: ‘Kroó György in memoriam’ from Signs, Games and Messages.

Recording for this example can be found in appendix B, ex. 3.
Appendix B: List of Recorded Examples

The playlist for these recordings can be found at:

https://goo.gl/CIdJuQ

or

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9kZN-55j2vtOups_tzU5au9LnXnfVtu

Example 1: Grabstein für Stephan (1978-1989)

Example 2: Kurtág describes the quintuplet motif of the third movement of Stele (1994) as a ‘funeral march’. He can be seen demonstrating this in the 1996 documentary The Matchstick Man, in which he acts out the gesture in front of Claudio Abbado, conductor of the premiere, in order to convey its meaning properly. The section of the music to which he is referring is played shortly after.