

DEAD DRAW? AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN KURTÁG AND BECKETT: THE OPERA *FIN DE PARTIE*¹

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SUMMARY. One could consider that over a period of six decades, between 1957 and 2017, Kurtág developed the ever-expanding idea of an opera based on the writings of Samuel Beckett. It started in 1957 when Ligeti, then living in Vienna, strongly suggested to his friend Kurtág, who was based in Paris, to go and see Beckett's latest plays, *En attendant Godot* and *Fin de partie*. The experience inspired Kurtág's immediate and enduring admiration for the Irish writer and since then, he has come a long way through the labyrinth of his own work. He made use of Beckett in his piece for the Hungarian singer Ildikó Monyók *What is the word*, then in *...pas à pas – nulle part...*, always proving that sounds and words share equal importance in musical setting. With his rich experience and mastery, the 92-year old Kurtág approached his first opera, plunging into the depths of Beckett's piece *Fin de partie*; he infused the theatre of the absurd with exquisite lyricism, thus enhancing the metaphorical power of the text with a refined musical discourse. The outcome of seven years of intense work (2010-2017), Kurtág's *Fin de partie* surprises the listener by the freshness of its musical language, an accurate translation into sound of Beckett's poetic theatrical universe. Rather than resulting in a mere tie, this encounter between two great artists sees music and text as equal winners in terms of expressive content, a true collaboration enriching the contemporary dramatic repertoire with a unique masterpiece.

Keywords: contemporary opera, Kurtág, Beckett, world premiere

Affording a welcome break from the expected La Scala repertoire, with its Verdian ethos, the world premiere of György Kurtág's opera *Fin de partie* took place on the 15th of November 2018. For the sold-out, rapt

¹ An abridged version of this article appeared in Bianca Țiplea Temeș, "Remiză Kurtág – Beckett? Premiera operei *Fin de partie* la Scala din Milano", in *Muzica*, No. 1/2019, pp. 52-58.

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audience, comprising both an international elite and amateur music-lovers alike, this unique dramatic work of the 92-year old composer proved a deeply immersive experience.

The choice of a Samuel Beckett text is an ambitious undertaking for any composer, considering the complex source material; translating such a text, carved to intimately address existential questions and confronting the spectre of life itself becomes a rather difficult task.

Theodor Adorno³ interprets the Beckett text as a drama of decay in which the lack of significance is the only significance, while Martin Esslin⁴ regards the work as a synonym for the desintegration of language as a tool of communication.

György Kurtág himself offers new approaches to Beckett by infusing the apparently arid text with an ineffable musical-poetic quality, unique to his artistic personality, showing an almost Schumann-esque musical sensitivity. It is possible to observe here a musical sublimation of the decrepitude depicted in the text, a similar procedure to the transmutation effected by Charles Baudelaire in *Les fleurs du mal* or by the Romanian writer Tudor Arghezi in his poem *Testament*. Beckett's work has also aroused the interest of another composer born in Romania, and one who later gained recognition abroad, namely Marcel Mihalovici who completed in Paris, in 1961, the one-act opera *Krapp, ou, La dernière bande*, and the music for the radio piece inspired by Beckett's writings, *Cascando*.

Information received during a telephone conversation with György Kurtág on November 20th, directly after the premiere, allows us to view Beckett's piece with new eyes. The composer suggests that *Fin de partie* should not be classified as theatre of the absurd. He plumbs the depths of the text and brings its concealed meanings to the surface, merging words and music in a perfect organic fusion.

Beckett's unique universe had a strong impact on the composer from the early days of his youth. In the aforementioned conversation, Kurtág generously shared valuable memories dating back over six decades, including the fact that in a letter of 1957, directly after his arrival in Paris, György Ligeti, already based in Vienna, strongly advised his close friend not to miss Beckett's *En attendant Godot* and *Fin de partie*. This was a revelation that remained with Kurtág throughout the ensuing sixty years, and made him forge with the patience of an alchemist a masterpiece of music theatre.

³ Adorno, Theodor: "Intento de entender Final de partida", *Notas sobre Literatura II*. Madrid: Akal, 2003, p. 294.

⁴ Esslin, Martin: *El teatro del absurdo*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1966, pp. 64-65.

Kurtág had previously engaged with Beckett's writings in the form of the text *What is the word*, which inspired a striking, touching piece written in two timbral versions (op. 30a/1990⁵ and op. 30b/1991) for the Hungarian singer and actress Ildikó Monyók, who lost her ability to speak after a terrible accident. Kurtág's dedicated, empathetic collaboration with the artist in preparing the performance of this piece contributed greatly to the gradual recovery of Ildikó Monyók's powers of speech.

Kurtág's approach to Kafka's, Hölderlin's or Anna Akhmatova's texts (to name but a few authors who inspired his music) provided ideal opportunities for the composer to demonstrate his ability to form an unbreakable unity between sound and word.

In the following years, Kurtág reconsidered Beckett's *oeuvre*, completing *...pas à pas - nulle part...* (1993-1998) which draws on passages from the Irish author's *mirlitonnades*. Regarding the composer's preoccupation with translating words into music, Catherine Laws acknowledges that "Kurtág's sensitivity to the meanings and sounding qualities of the texts he sets is apparent in all his settings"⁶. The same aspect is also emphasized in other perceptive studies written by Grégoire Tosser⁷, Geneviève Mathon⁸, and Haydée Chabagi⁹. Chabagi concedes: "...*pas à pas - nulle part...* est le fruit d'un long travail de lecture et d'écoute des poèmes de Beckett, comme si, avant d'écrire, Kurtág avait laissé résonner en lui ces brèves *mirlitonnades*. Dans chaque pièce [...], la musique épouse au plus près la forme du poème de Beckett, à tous les niveaux du discours: la construction syntaxique, le jeu des rimes et des échos sonores, les motifs rythmiques, le travail des images et la progression du sens. Mais le compositeur explore aussi toutes les *résonnances* du poème: il s'agit pas alors de développer – de prolonger le discours, musical cette fois – mais de faire résonner, dans le jeu des modulations (le ton) et des couleurs sonores (le timbre), le bruissement des mots"¹⁰. Similarly, meticulous

⁵ The initial title of the first version was very suggestive: *Samuel Beckett Sends a Message through Ildikó Monyók in István Siklós Translation: What is the Word?*.

⁶ Laws, Catherine: *Headaches Among the Overtones. Music in Beckett, Beckett in Music*, Editions Rodopi, Amsterdam – New York, 2013, p. 415.

⁷ Tosser, Grégoire: "Maximes et mirlitonnades : '...pas à pas -nulle part...' op. 36 de György Kurtág, long after Beckett", in *Beckett et la musique* (Geneviève Mathon, David Lauffer eds.), Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2014, pp.121-159.

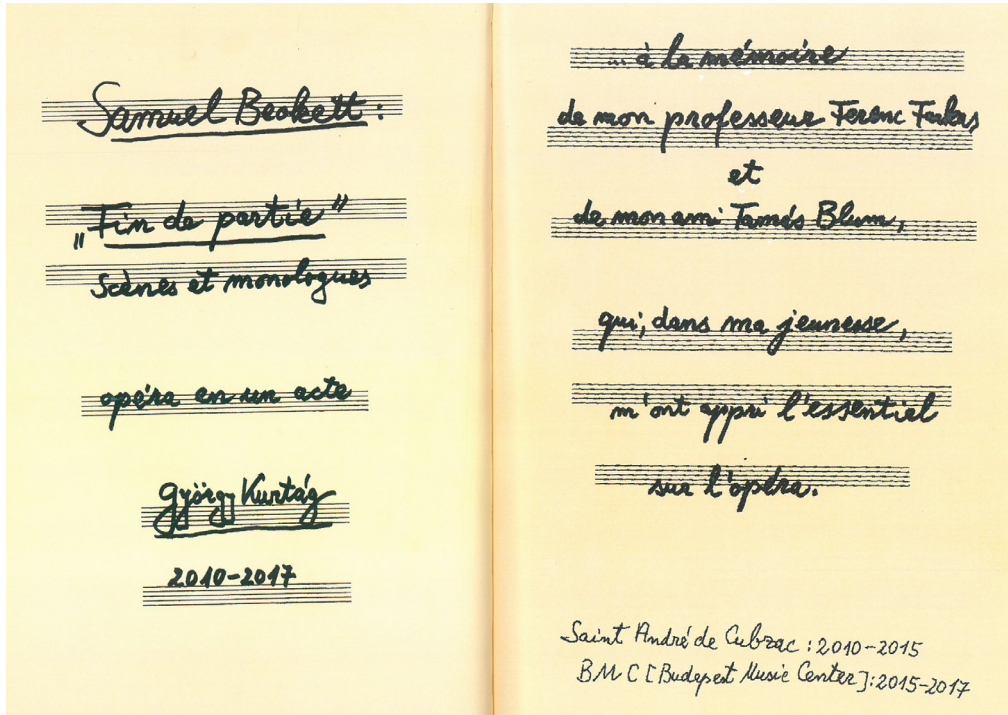
⁸ Mathon, Geneviève: "Quelques mots de Beckett dans la langue de Kurtág", Pierre Maréchaux, Grégoire Tosser (eds.), in *Ligatures: la pensée musicale de György Kurtág*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, (collection "Æsthetica"), 2009, pp. 67-78.

⁹ Chabagi, Haydée: "Comment le dire ? Sur '... pas à pas – nulle part...', une œuvre de György Kurtág sur des poèmes de Samuel Beckett et des maximes de Sébastien Chamfort. Pour baryton solo, trio à cordes et percussions, opus 36 (1993-1998)", in *Po&sie* 2007/2, N° 120, pp. 142-164.

¹⁰ Chabagi, Haydée: *Op. cit.*, p. 143-144.

translation of the words into musical notation is evident also in folklore-inspired pieces, as exemplified in the *Colindă-Baladă* (2009), in which the text of the Romanian carol collected by Bartók and employed by Kurtág as a principal melodic theme, is reflected in sounds "almost in an Augenmusik manner"¹¹.

Figure 1



György Kurtág: *Fin de partie*, manuscript title pages, reproduced by the composer's kind permission

Dedicated both to his composition teacher Ferenc Farkas, who, in order to encourage his student, analyzed for him the dramaturgy of Verdi's *Rigoletto* at a composition course, and also to Tamás Blum, general musical director of the Opera House in Debrecen, who entrusted the young Kurtág

¹¹ Țiplea Temeș, Bianca: "Modern Tapestry from Vintage Fabrics; 'Colindă Baladă' by György Kurtág", in *Folk Music as a Fermenting Agent for Composition, Past and Present* (Bianca Țiplea Temeș, William Kinderman eds.), MediaMusica, Cluj-Napoca, 2019, p. 113.

with the preparation of Verdi's *Falstaff*¹², *Fin de partie* marks a new stage in the history of the operatic form. György Kurtág stated in our conversation of November 20th that he learnt to compose opera by taking as models works by Monteverdi, Mussorgsky, Verdi (especially *Falstaff*) and Debussy (*Pelléas et Mélisande*). Yet, he admitted at the same time that for him Ligeti forever remains "the God of Music". *Fin de partie* completes the succession of twentieth and twenty-first century masterpieces of the form.

Figure 2



Gy. Kurtág's *Fin de partie*
(Premiere at La Scala, Milan, November 2018)
Photo credit: Brescia e Amisano

With characteristic meticulousness, Kurtág composed the work over a period of about seven years (between 2010 and 2017), and the opera displays a panoply of emotions, ranging from the tragic and lyrical, to the grotesque and oneiric, but never abdicating the poetic. This is a hallmark of the composer, always resistant to belonging to anything that might be called a trend.

¹² Both biographical details have been generously shared by György Kurtág over the telephone, during the same conversation.

Viewed through Kurtág's soundworld, Beckett's text acquires an even greater expressivity, and the sheer black and white of his literary style, in which the dialogue is stripped of any communicative function, becomes a living universe, rich in nuances, enhanced by the four vocal parts (at the world premiere in Milan, Hamm/Frode Olsen, Clov/Leigh Melrose, Nell/Hilary Summers and Nagg/Leonardo Cortellazzi), by the skills of the conductor Markus Stenz, by the stage direction of Pierre Audi, and also by the stage setting, kept within the bounds of the minimal and quintessential.

Still under the overwhelming spell of the performance (which required the utmost attention from the audience because of its complexity), I automatically drew a parallel between the freshness of the musical language the nonagenarian composer outlined in his work and the ever-young Dorian Gray, the famous character of another brilliant Irish writer, Oscar Wilde. Yet, the parallel needs to be read as though reversed in a mirror; if Dorian Gray remained untouched by the passing of time, as only his painted portrait became older, in Kurtág's case the music stays forever young. Trying to discover the secret of this eternal freshness I asked him from whence the modernity of the work arises, apart from the timbral source¹³. With his characteristic modesty, he answered that „the piece is modern only through the intention of translating each moment of the text in musical gestures, the harmonies and the semantics accurately responding to the situation of the text itself”¹⁴.

¹³ The cymbalom and the accordeon, acknowledged as sonorous hallmarks of the composer's music, are present in the orchestra, in a subtle way, connoting, according to Kurtág's words in our conversation, the folklore of all the peoples.

¹⁴ Same conversation on the 20th of November 2018, Romanian original: „piesa este modernă doar prin prisma încercării de a traduce fiecare moment al textului în gesturi muzicale, armoniile și semantica depinzând cu acurețe de situația textului”.

Figure 3

György Kurtág: *Fin de partie*, manuscript pages, reproduced by the composer's kind permission

Undoubtedly, György Kurtág knew how to interpret Beckett's expressiveness with an imaginary stethoscope, which he built into the score. With superlative melotherapy, he addresses the somber tensions embedded in the text. The original French title's hint at a game of chess insinuates a decisive victory of one competitor over the other. I initially hypothesized that the encounter between Kurtág and Beckett on the musical chessboard concluded with a tie. This was not so! Rather, a seven-year game ensues in which two grandmasters emerge as equal winners: Beckett's text stimulated the finest compositional strategies from the musician, while Kurtág's music admirably responded to the profound depths of the text. Such a masterpiece does not resolve with absolutes, nor conclusive thoughts crystallize. Rather, they naturally surface from Beckett's script:

„Et pour terminer? Jeter! Mes compliments!”

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