



György Kurtág: Scenes

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These two Kurtág discs were released more or less simultaneously. Both are song recitals; the unusual ensemble is common to both albums but a couple of works on the Avie issue make use of a piano rather than a cimbalom, while three of the works (accounting in each case for more than half of the duration of the disc) overlap. Some of these cycles have cropped up in mixed programmes before now, but perhaps the best overview to date of Kurtág's singular approach to songwriting is a Hungaroton disc 'Works for Soprano' (HCD 31821) which features the redoubtable German-born, Hungarian trained (and bred) Adrienne Csengery, who was the composer's soprano of choice back in the 1980s (Susan Narucki namechecks her in the Avie leaflet). Her idiomatic Hungarian is obviously a big advantage on that recording which includes four of the sets that feature on the Avie disc plus a fine account of the Op 19 cycle (which is sung in Russian). Frankly however, it sounds a bit dated compared to both new discs. Kurtág is unquestionably a master, and as the last half-century or so has elapsed the passage of time has facilitated the emergence of something of a Kurtág performance tradition, something from which both singers and players on these releases have undoubtedly been able to benefit.

Kurtág is now 93; he is the king of the aphorism, and his music unquestionably demands the fullest concentration on the part of the listener. His is an art of compression and in the works spread across these two discs every second counts; every breath, sound and silence – every heartbeat. Reviewing them in tandem has been an education for me, comparable to the considerable time I spent thirty years ago getting to grips with Webern. Familiarity in this case breeds power and understanding. I started with the Op 22 cycle for voice and cimbalom. These 'dialogues' with oneself, their 'calls and responses' range from a tiny, exuberant declamation of self-frustration (No 2, Egyensúly) via a hypnotic, enigmatic repetition of a single line (No 5, Labirintus), to the fragile ethereal beauty of No 6 (Ami megmaradt) and the plodding riddle of No 7, Ars poetica – a haiku/fable which alludes to a snail ascending Mount Fuji. On the Audite disc the silken-voiced Ukrainian soprano Viktoriia Vitrenko finds life and drama in a reading which ravishes and delights, while she is accompanied by an apparently fruitier sounding cimbalom than is Susan Narucki on Avie. But with the American's subtly shaded, more attentive focus on the sound and projection of the Hungarian language she perhaps conveys yet more breadth with the gentler instrument. Either way, both interpretations are treasurable.

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Gulyás' words are initially matched with a yearning, ultimately questioning violin line and a stumbling cimbalom, while the second stanza evokes a benignly Bergian expressionism, which is radiantly conveyed by Narucki. The last two verses are more jagged and astringent, qualities that certainly don't daunt the American and which underpin the violin part until the closing phrase of the piece. The Audite recording is warmer than its Avie counterpart, and beautifully suits Vitrenko's accomplished theatrics in both the quieter music and its more violent outbursts. The instrumentalists on this disc also seem to allow Kurtág's condensed ideas a little more space. But it's not a competition, and the differences between these readings both illuminate and validate this extraordinary music.

Both discs open with one of Kurtág's best-known vocal works, the fifteen brief 'songs' of Scenes from a Novel, Op 19 to words by the Russian poetess Rimma Dalos. A double-bass is added to the mix here. Listening to these performances in close succession, the idea of Kurtág, the master of the miniature writing a full-length opera (his *Fin de Partie* was premiered last year to more or less unanimous acclaim) seems less improbable. Scenes from a Novel essentially incorporates the monologue of a woman who has loved and lost, but is ultimately (outwardly at least) feisty and resilient to the experience. At its centre is the histrionic seventh song, Rondo; the musical and emotional ground covered in this three minute number (an epic by Kurtág's standards) is extraordinary. I really enjoyed both these accounts of this masterpiece. First of all, the wealth of drama and colour the composer conjures in an instrumental accompaniment of just three instruments is astonishing in itself, and if the Avie disc revels in the meticulous musicality of the detail, the Audite performers are cushioned by terrific sonics which expertly amplify Viktoriia Vitrenko's raw and neurotic take on these songs. On the other hand, Susan Narucki's more refined, micro-analytical approach serves this simultaneously complex and simple music equally convincingly. One might expect the Ukranian singer perhaps to sing Russian more idiomatically but to my ears there is nothing to choose between them. In terms of this shared repertoire then, I strongly suspect ardent Kurtágophiles will want both discs.

The remaining pieces on both discs support this view. Susan Narucki provides abundantly musical accounts of Kurtág sets that have in the main been recorded before. Notable among these is his Op 20, the peculiar cycle of unaccompanied vocal fragments set to the words of Attila József. These tiny statements (they defy the appellation 'poetry') are pregnant with depth and universality, while Narucki invests these naked, improbably powerful pieces (and the brief silences that separate them) with profound tact and riveting musicality. One work that was completely new to me was the set of Inscriptions Op 25, with piano accompaniment. The first of these, Flower is a setting of a fifteenth century text which is at once almost childlike; it's delivered by Narucki as if she is projecting a rainbow of sadness. The third and final inscription incorporates words found on the grave of a young woman consumed by fever on the eve of the Second World War. It is devastating, its piano accompaniment quietly Ligetian. Narucki's instrumental collaborators are beyond superb, and the Avie sound remains consistently cool and detailed, abundantly suitable for Kurtág's elaborate creations.

An added attraction of the Audite issue is what appears to be the premiere recording of Kurtág's Op 37a, Several Movements from Georg Cristoph Lichtenberg's Scrapbooks. These are settings for voice and double-bass and once again draw out Viktoriia Vitrenko's latent theatricality as well as featuring a remarkable double-bass part brilliantly played by Niek de Groot. Listeners will not need a translation to be impressed by the dark humour of these miniatures. This is Kurtág in an uncharacteristically ironic vein.

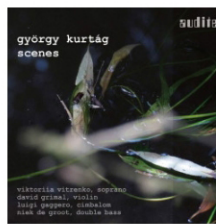
The disc also features a couple of Kurtág's purely instrumental works which provide some welcome respite from his vocal output. The early Duos Op 4 for violin and cimbalom alternate flavours of goulash spice and tartness, while in the solo cimbalom Hommage to the painter Ferenc Berényi (a 70th birthday present) he communicates a heartfelt, yet seemingly effortless profundity. Audite's sound is bathed throughout with a cushioned warmth which perhaps surprisingly works wonders with Kurtág's sometimes barbed, astringent music.

In conclusion, while elements of this review are necessarily comparative, I certainly don't wish to imply that I prefer one or other of these fine discs. The repertoire is incontrovertibly fascinating, and the performances and recording in each case are first rate. Adherents of Kurtág's powerful, unique, humane voice will need no persuasion from me to acquire both. Newcomers can rest assured that either issue will provide immense satisfaction. Hopefully it will not be too long before we have the premiere recording of Fin de Partie.

György KURTÁG (b. 1926)

Scenes

Scenes from a Novel, Op. 19 (1981-82) [19:20]
Eight Duos for violin and cimbalom, Op. 4 (1961) [6:29]
Seven Songs for soprano and cimbalom, Op. 22 (1981) [9:57]
A Twilight in Winter Recollected, for soprano, violin and cimbalom, Op. 8 (1969) [6:37]
Einige Sätze aus den Siedelbüchern Georg Christoph Lichtenbergs, Op. 37a (1996) [14:59]
Hommage a Berényi Ferenc 70th for cimbalom (1997) [3:32]
Viktória Vitrenko (soprano), David Grimal (violin), Luigi Gaggero (cimbalom), Niek de Groot (double bass)
rec. 2018, Leibniz Saal, Hannover Congress Centrum, Germany
Texts and translations not included, but accessible at audite.de
AUDITE 97.762 [60:56]

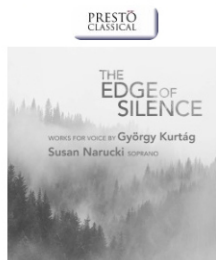


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The Edge of Silence

Scenes from a Novel, Op. 19 (1981-82) [19:32]
Three Old Inscriptions for voice and piano, Op. 25 (1986) [6:00]
S. K. - Remembrance Noise for soprano and violin, Op. 12 (1974-75) [6:36]
Attila József - Fragments for solo soprano, Op. 20 (1981-82) [12:27]
Seven Songs for soprano and cimbalom, Op. 22 (1981) [9:14]
Requiem for the Beloved for soprano and piano, Op. 26 (1986-87) [5:08]
A Twilight in Winter Recollected for soprano, violin and cimbalom Op. 8 (1969) [6:00]
Susan Narucki (soprano), Donald Berman (piano), Curtis Macomber (violin), Nicholas Tolle (cimbalom), Kathryn Schulmeister (double bass)
rec. 2018, Conrad Prebys Concert Hall, University of California, San Diego, USA
Texts and translations included
AVIE AV2408 [64:57]



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In the four stanzas and six plus minutes of Kurtág's relatively early Opus 8 *Egy téli alkony emlékére* (A Twilight in Winter Recollected) the intense melancholy of Pál Gulyás' words are initially matched with a yearning, ultimately questioning violin line and a stumbling cimbalom, while the second stanza evokes a benignly Bergian expressionism, which is radiantly conveyed by Narucki. The last two verses are more jagged and astringent, qualities that certainly don't daunt the American and which underpin the violin part until the dosing phrase of the piece. The Audite recording is warmer than its Avie counterpart, and beautifully suits Vitrenko's accomplished theatricality in both the quieter music and its more violent outbursts. The instrumentalists on this disc also seem to allow Kurtág's condensed ideas a little more space. But it's not a competition, and the differences between these readings both illuminate and validate this extraordinary music.

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Richard Hanlon