

A dark, moody photograph of a pond at night. The water is dark and reflective, with some light catching the surface. Several long, thin reeds or grasses are visible, some standing upright and others leaning over. A few lily pads are scattered across the water, some showing signs of decay or damage. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and serene.

audite

györgy kurtág
scenes

viktoriia vitrenko, soprano
david grimal, violin
luigi gaggero, cimbalom
niek de groot, double bass

györgy kurtág

Scenes from a Novel ('Stsenī iz romana'), Op. 19
15 Songs to Poems by R. Dalos

Eight Duos for Violin and Cimbalom, Op. 4

Seven Songs ('Hét Dal'), Op. 22

In memory of a Winter evening
(('Egy Téli alkony emlékére'), Op. 8

Several Movements from
Georg Christoph Lichtenberg's 'Scrapbooks'
(('Sudelbücher'), Op. 37a

Hommage à Berényi Ferenc 70

viktoriia vitrenko, soprano
david grimal, violin
luigi gaggero, cimbalom
niek de groot, double bass

Some reflections on the poetics of György Kurtág

Sacred music

Similar to the music of many composers of the past, and to that of a few of today's composers, Kurtág's music is authentically sacred. Not because it makes explicit use of religious themes (in fact there is art that illustrates religious contents but which, not having a transcendent inspiration, is not – or does not want to be – sacred), but because it alludes, in its essence, to a transcendent dimension. First of all, what makes a work of art “transcendent” is its being permeated by silence. A silence intended not as an acoustic phenomenon, but a psychological one:

“Something happens, and it is answered” („etwas passiert, und es wird geantwortet“) – Kurtág often describes his poetics with these words, which express effectively the dialogical structure of his music. Moreover, it is precisely this dialogical structure that imposes the need for listening: without that psychological silence that enables us to hear authentically, in fact, there can be no dialogue, neither with the Other outside us (for example another person or, in the case of a musician, the Other represented by a score), nor with the Other within us. The perception of this “Other within us” is, indeed, the precondition for every dialogue: I cannot listen to the Other outside myself if I am not able to listen to the Other within me. In other words: how we listen to ourselves determines how we listen to others (or fail to do so). However, at the same time, being able to perceive the Other is a consequence of listening. Simone Weil expressed a similar concept when she wrote: “Grace refills, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void.”¹

Therefore, we are open to Transcendence in the sense that our identity is based on an endless dialogue. As Hölderlin wrote, “We are a conversation.”² Also, in our opinion, Kurtág's music alludes to Transcendence because, in its essence, it expresses this “conversation.”

Kurtág – the composer

Kurtág uses to say: “my mother-tongue is Bartók, and Bartók's mother-tongue was Beethoven.” This fact is particularly noteworthy at a time when artists normally prefer to break with tradition. As the art critic Christine Sourgins ironically writes, today a painter who still “gets his hands dirty” with brushes and colors (instead of devoting himself to “installations”, “performance” and similar things ...) would be seen with a certain suspect ... and Kurtág, in fact, is not afraid in the least of getting his own hands “dirty”! Kurtág does not feel the naive need – today so widespread – of “being original by breaking with tradition”, nor does he want to “innovate the language”

¹ Simone Weil: Cahiers / Aufzeichnungen I, Munich 1991, 212.

² Friedrich Hölderlin: “Friedensfeier” [1801]. In: Friedrich Beißner (ed.): Sämtliche Werke. Leipzig 1965, 346.

just for a taste of innovation. On the contrary, Kurtág finds his identity as a composer by continuing the tradition, finding his unique voice by remaining in the traditional framework of music made up of rhythms, melodies, and harmonies. At the same time, he maintained a “healthy” and profound dialogue with other personalities, with whom he feels a particular spiritual affinity (Bartók and Beethoven, Schumann, Schubert, Bach; and writers like Kafka, Beckett, Hölderlin, János Pilinszky, Attila József ...)

Kurtág and the voice

It is no coincidence that several of Kurtág's masterpieces are written for the voice, as this CD shows. The voice is the purest and most human musical instrument, which for Kurtág seems to represent, among other things, a double bond with the romantic lyric tradition and with ancient music (Gregorian chant, above all). The poetic illuminations of Kafka, Pilinszky, József, Lichtenberg and other poets inspire Kurtág, who translates their poems by illustrating them with music. We note that this musical translation is often more powerful than the original poetic text (which does not necessarily have to be a “great text” from the literary viewpoint, whereas it has to be a text capable of clearly inspiring a musical gesture).

Kurtág – the interpreter and the teacher

However, Kurtág's activity as composer is inseparable from that as an interpreter. If in the past, composers were almost always also instrumentalists or singers (or both!), today it is rare to find the two qualities combined. Also, Kurtág is such an excellent interpreter that some of the best musicians in the world flock to him to receive chamber music lessons: not only on his music but on any repertoire.

We can probably say that the heart of his teaching is ethical: what is striking is Kurtág's constant reference to the need for an authentic assumption of responsibility towards the smallest musical detail (one must – Kurtág says – “deserve a crescendo, deserve a sforzando” ...).

“My greatest enemy – Kurtág often repeats – is the one who is already playing the next bar without deserving it.” In other words, we would say: those who are not in contact with vertical dimension (the transcendent, which in music also corresponds to the immanence of the style marking a composer's poetics) cannot move horizontally (i.e., through the narrative element, which unfolds over time).

Grace and guilt

However, where does such a highly ethical attitude come from? In Judit Kele's movie, *The Matchstick Man*, Kurtág describes himself as “A cockroach that crawls and seeks to become a human being.” Moreover, he names one of his compositions with matches “The cockroach looking for the way to the light.”

Here we can grasp two essential elements of Kurtág's poetics: the sense of guilt (feeling an insect) and not feeling worthy (the need to seek and deserve the light or to become a human being³). Kurtág's constant reference to the need for responsibility on the part of the interpreter, therefore, reveals – according to us – the will and the want, on the part of the Hungarian composer, for a reparation, for an atonement of this sense of guilt to be able to deserve the grace.

Moreover, it is precisely this sense of transcendental guilt (inexhaustible and inextinguishable by its very nature) the profound origin of Kurtág's general dissatisfaction with many interpreters. This is the real reason for phrases like: "The composer has suffered for each note, and those who interpret his music must suffer as well"; or again, referring to musicians who do not do (enough) this painful empathic effort: "It's not *my* music they do not understand, it's *the* music."

Seeking for the light

Aspiring to the light in his compositions, Kurtág normally does not find it in a wide-ranging narrative, but rather in gestures, splinters, fragments, in instant poetic illuminations. As a matter of fact, Kurtág writes mostly short compositions, finding the "grace" in pure and archetypal *objets trouvés*, such as a major scale played slowly, or a slow arpeggio on the empty strings of a guitar. And, with regard to poetic illuminations, it is interesting to point out how the expression previously mentioned "Something happens, and it is answered" („etwas passiert und es wird geantwortet") captures perfectly also the spirit of a Japanese *haiku*: "In the old pond / a frog plunges / the noise of the water" (Matsuo Bashō). The same temporal density, the same coincidence of eternity and instantaneity that characterize this masterpiece by Bashō are found in *Hét Dal* [Seven Songs], **Op. 22** which, in fact, could be considered almost a haiku cycle. The main theme of these songs seems to be that of fading (sinking and losing consciousness; a threadless labyrinth without maze nor Ariadne; the scent of a hyacinth ...) contrasted with the final image, "in crescendo", of a snail climbing ... the Mount Fuji.

We can find the same intensity in *Egy Téli alkony emlékére* [In memory of a Winter evening], **Op. 8** where the poetic text finds its translation in a profoundly expressive and moving music: note, for example, at the beginning of the second movement, the almost Wagnerian harmonies expressing the yearning in solitude; or those lines played by violin and cimbalom, at the beginning of the third, that draw lost paths leading, in the end, inevitably to death.

Written for the typical traditional Hungarian ensemble (soprano, violin, cimbalom and double bass), *Stseni iz romana* [Scenes from a Novel], **Op. 19** owe part of their pathos to the use of the Russian language (Kurtág is one of the few non-Russian composers to have used the language of Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva in different compositions). This masterpiece has the structure of a "typical" romantic Lieder

³ It goes without saying, this reminds us Kafka.

cycle (such as Schumann's *Frauenliebe und -leben*), where the tragic nature of a loving relationship and its inevitable doom are depicted with unforgettable intensity.

Kurtág is rarely ironic (except in the sense in which Kafka could be considered as “ironic” in turn) and the **Sudelbücher** [*Scrapbooks*] on lyrics by the German satirist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799) are probably an exception in his output; they reveal an unusual, yet no less profound, aspect of the Hungarian master's poetics. Composed for the German soprano Maria Husmann, who was assisting Kurtág and his wife, both ill, during their residence at the *Wissenschaftskolleg* in Berlin, the cycle is dedicated to Annette and Wolf Lepenies, hosts of the Kurtág at that time. It was Wolf Lepenies who gave the Hungarian composer the inspiration for this composition, giving him a volume with Lichtenberg's aphorisms.

In **8 Duos for Violin and Cimbalom, Op. 4** Kurtág uses the Hungarian instrument *par excellence* for the first time. In our opinion, apart from the randomness of the occasion of the composition of these duets, often recalled by Kurtág himself (the request for a piece by a violinist who at the time was performing in a duo with a cimbalom), Kurtág's love for the cimbalom can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it is a “bridge” to Hungarian and Bartók music; on the other hand, we believe that it is its medieval sound, almost “Franciscan” that fascinates the composer (the sound of the cimbalom is pure, “naked,” even compared to that of the piano, which somehow is too “rich” for Kurtág⁴).

The **Hommage à Berényi Ferenc 70** – which closes this CD – is a profoundly evocative “birthday present,” written for the eponymous Hungarian painter (1927-2004), a close friend of Kurtág.

As shown in the carefully chosen compositions for this CD, Kurtág is one of the most intimate, artistic voices of our time. His language is rooted in tradition and at the same time unique: for us, he is above all the composer who knew how to find a true legato to transfigure his sorrow, making it cantabile, and thus giving birth to some of the music pages, among the most wonderful and moving that have ever been written.

Luigi Gaggero
Translation: Valentina Bensi

⁴ Kurtág often recalls that his favorite instrument is the pianino (the upright piano) used with sordino.



VIKTORIIA VITRENKO

Viktoriia Vitrenko is a versatile Ukrainian singer and conductor. She studied voice with Angelika Luz, Georg Nigl and Yasuko Kozaki, and conducting with Denis Rouger and Viktor Petrychenko at the State University of Music and Performing Arts Stuttgart and at the National Music Academy of Ukraine.

Already in her homeland, Viktoriia Vitrenko took a stand for contemporary music. In Stuttgart, she deepened her skills and achieved a high artistic level in the fields of conducting and singing. She demonstrated her versatility and creativity in various projects, combining her two passions conducting and singing. From 2010 to 2014, she performed with the female vocal ensemble *Making waves* (Ukraine) in the Ukraine as well as in Great Britain, Norway, France, Macedonia, Greece and Russia, amongst others, and won numerous awards in prestigious competitions such as *Florilège Vocal de Tours* 2014 (3rd prize) and *Ohrid Choir Festival* 2013 (1st prize). Since 2014, her commitments led her in many different directions.

As a conductor, she led the Pforzheim chamber orchestra, the Freiburger Barockorchester and the Concerto Tübingen. A winner of the *Dirigentenforum*, she conducted the Philharmonischer Chor Berlin, the Gächinger Kantorei, the Chor der Deutschen Oper Berlin, the NDR Rundfunkchor, the KammerChor Saarbrücken, the Rundfunkchor Berlin, among others. In the 2015-2016 season, she also directed the youth choir in the production *Alice in Wonderland* by Johannes Harneit at the Junge Oper Stuttgart.

As a singer, she acted e.g. in György Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments* (directed by Bernd Schmitt), winning an advancement award in the *Competition for the Interpretation of New Music* 2015 in Karlsruhe with this production. In 2017-2018, she performed in the Ukrainian National Theater in Carmine Emanuele's *Cellas Pane, sale, sabbia* (world premiere) with the Ukho Ensemble Kiev (conductor Luigi Gaggero) and in the Casco Theater in Raphaël Cendo's *Avventure die anima e di corpo* (world premiere), as well as at the *Opera Forward Festival* in the Netherlands.

In the season 2018/19, she leads the Landesjugendensemble Neue Musik Baden-Württemberg and the Divertimento Ensemble (Italy) as a guest conductor and sings a.o. as part of the vocal ensemble of *Silbersee*, a center for experimental theater and opera under the direction of the Dutch singer and conductor Romain Bischoff.

Viktoriia Vitrenko is a co-founder of the *InterAKT Initiative* e.V., an independent group of interdisciplinary artists based in Stuttgart, and of *Mixed Sound Personnel* for voice, percussion and electronics.



DAVID GRIMAL

David Grimal is a musician who enjoys an international reputation for the originality of his musical career. In his tireless quest to reflect on the role of his art in society, he juxtaposes perspectives in order to make music differently by reinventing the sense of the collective.

As an internationally renowned soloist, he has been invited to perform under the direction of leading conductors (Eschenbach, Krivine, Pletnev, Frühbeck de Burgos, Eötvös, Nelsons, Saraste etc.) with formations such as the Orchestre de Paris, the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, the Berliner Symphoniker, the Russian National Orchestra, the New Japan Philharmonic, the English Chamber Orchestra, and the Mozarteum Orchestra Salzburg.

He is a welcome guest in the world's foremost concert halls, e.g. Suntory Hall in Tokyo, Philharmonie de Paris, Vienna Musikverein, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Berlin Konzerthaus, Wigmore Hall in London, Zurich Tonhalle, and Lincoln Center in New York.

Many composers have dedicated works to him, including Dalbavie, Pauset, Escaich, Lim, Zygel, Gasparov, Tanada, and Kissine.

David Grimal is the creator and artistic director of *Les Dissonances*, the only symphony orchestra in the world that regularly plays the standard repertoire without a conductor. Over the past ten years, *Les Dissonances* has established itself in the major European concert halls as a model unique in the world. In recent seasons, *Les Dissonances* achieved triumphant success internationally.

As an artistic director, David Grimal has developed the concept 'Let's play together!' based on his experience with *Les Dissonances*. He is invited by many orchestras to work with them and play the great violin concertos, notably Budapesti Vonósok, Sinfonietta Cracovia, the Moscow Chamber Orchestra, the Orquesta Sinfónica de Galicia, Orquestra Clássica de Espinho (Portugal), the Orchestre National de Lorraine, National Orchestra of Metz, Taipei Symphony Orchestra and others.

An indefatigable researcher, he re-examines the early music repertoire and explores historically informed performance practice with musicians such as Andreas Staier, Brice Pauset, Mathieu Dupouy and Maude Gratton. As if in natural prolongation of this urge to share with others, he has created '*L'Autre Saison*', a season of concerts for the homeless in Paris.

He is a sought-after pedagogue, and currently teaches at the Hochschule für Musik Saar in Saarbrücken.

David Grimal was appointed *Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres* by the French Ministry of Culture in 2008.



LUIGI GAGGERO

Luigi Gaggero has been performing as cimbalom and percussion player as well as a conductor of contemporary music ensembles at the important concert halls and festivals across Europe, the USA, and China, among them the Philharmonics in Berlin, Paris and Kiev, Milano Musica, Carnegie Hall, Salzburger

Festspiele, BBC Proms London, Biennali in Salzburg and Venezia, Klangspuren, DeSingel etc.

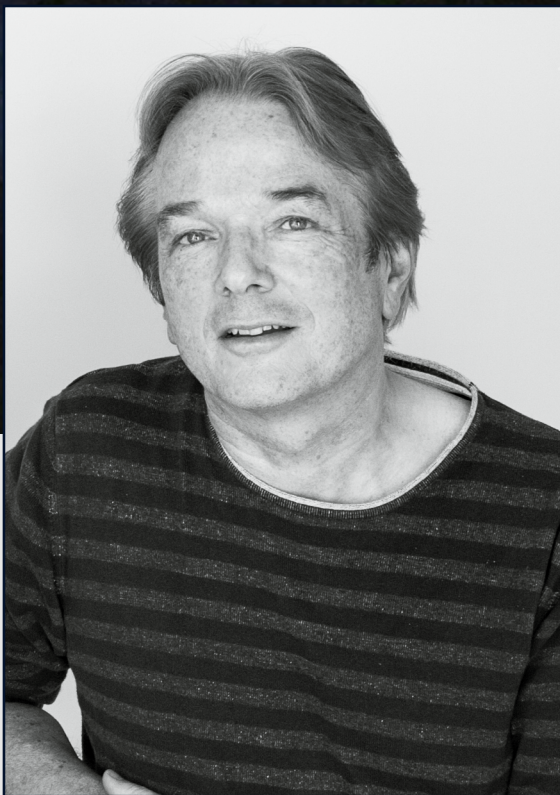
For 20 years he has dedicated himself to the development of new playing techniques on the cimbalom, revolutionizing the approach to the instrument. He premiered more than 40 compositions – solo pieces, concertos and chamber music – which were written for him by many of the leading contemporary composers. This contribution essentially broadened the cimbalom repertoire.

Faraway from a widespread structuralist approach to modern music, Luigi Gaggero privileges a phenomenological one. In this spirit he co-founded the Ukho Ensemble Kyiv as artistic and music director in 2015 and has conducted the ensemble since then. In 2018, he was also appointed chief conductor of the Kyiv State Symphony Orchestra. He has regularly performed with leading European orchestras (e.g. Berliner Philharmoniker, Filarmonica della Scala, Radio Filharmonisch Orkest Holland, Philharmonia Orchestra London; ensembles Intercontemporain, Scharoun, Oenm Salzburg) under the direction of conductors such as Claudio Abbado, Daniel Barenboim, Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Kent Nagano, Antonio Pappano, and Simon Rattle.

Luigi Gaggero has recorded numerous CDs: As a conductor, he released CDs dedicated to Gervasoni, Hosokawa, Andreyev, Solbiati, Monteverdi and Gesualdo; as a cimbalom player, he recorded works by Eötvös, Fedele, Francesconi, Gervasoni, Hosokawa, Lévinas, Kurtág and Solbiati.

He studied percussion and conducting in Genoa with Andrea Pestalozza (who also inspired him to discover 20th Century Music enthusiastically), cimbalom with Márta Fábán in Budapest, and percussion with Edgar Guggeis and Rainer Seegers at the Hochschule für Musik “Hanns Eisler” in Berlin where he was the first percussionist to receive a soloist-diploma with honors.

Luigi Gaggero is Professor for Cimbalom at the Conservatoire and the Académie Supérieure de Musique in Strasbourg. He plays a *Kozmosz* cimbalom built by István Jancsó.



NIEK DE GROOT

Dutch double bassist Niek de Groot is one of today's leading soloists. Originally a trumpet-player he started playing the double-bass at 18. Within an unusually short time he became principal bass with several European ensembles, including a 10-year tenure as principal Solo-Bass with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.

After his formal studies he further developed his skills at the Banff Centre for Arts, Canada. Niek's playing has benefited a great deal also from attending master classes with eminent cellists Frans Helmerson, Lluís Claret, Laurence Lesser and in collaborations with Leonard Bernstein, György Sebók and Mstislav Rostropovich.

Since 2006 Niek de Groot has dedicated himself entirely to chamber music and solo performances. He performs regularly as a soloist and chamber musician at the best known concert halls and music festivals. His repertoire includes a great deal of contemporary music and he has worked closely with composers such as Kurtág, Stockhausen, Saariaho, Vasks and Gubaidulina. He recorded several CDs, among them contemporary duos for Violin and Double Bass on audite (aud. 97.732). Upcoming projects include the world-premieres of several new Double Bass concertos he commissioned.

Since 1996, Niek de Groot is Senior Professor for Double Bass at the Folkwang University of the Arts, Essen. He also taught at institutions in Norway, the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain and regularly gives master classes worldwide.

Through his career, Niek de Groot has played on rare double basses by Cerutti, Bajoni and Amati. Since 2016 he got the lifelong privilege to play the world famous Domenico Montagnana double bass from 1747. His bows are especially made for him by Jochen Schmidt, his baroque and classical bows are by Gerhard Landwehr.



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recording:

December 9 - 12, 2018

recording location:

Leibniz Saal (Hannover Congress Centrum)

recording format:

pcm, 96 kHz / 24bit

recording producer:

Dipl.-Tonmeister Ludger Böckenhoff

sound & editing:

Dipl.-Tonmeister Justus Beyer

photos:

cover: Thomas Lefeldt © 2012

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