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András Schiff

Scarlatti Keyboard Sonatas
Kurtág Selections from *Játékok*

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András Schiff makes his debut at Lucerne Festival, 1990
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Domenico Scarlatti (1685–1757)

13 selected Keyboard Sonatas

- Sonata in D major, K. 96. *Allegro* 5:09
- Sonata in F major, K. 518. *Allegro* 6:16
- Sonata in F minor, K. 519. *Allegro assai* 2:56
- Sonata in A major, K. 208. *Adagio e cantabile* 3:23
- Sonata in A major, K. 209. *Allegro* 4:17
- Sonata in A minor, K. 175. *Allegro* 3:39
- Sonata in C major, K. 513. *Pastorale. Moderato – Molto allegro – Presto* 5:35
- Sonata in E minor, K. 394. *Allegro* 5:42
- Sonata in E major, K. 395. *Allegro* 3:26
- Sonata in G minor, K. 426. *Andante* 8:19
- Sonata in G major, K. 427. *Presto quanto sia possibile* 2:18
- Sonata in B-flat major, K. 544. *Cantabile* 3:51
- Sonata in B-flat major, K. 545. *Prestissimo* 2:58

György Kurtág (*1926)

Selections from *Játékok* ("Games"), Vol. 5

- Fanfares* 0:51
- A Voice in the Distance* (for Alfred Schlee's 80th birthday) 1:10
- Preface to a Bálint exhibition* 1:16
- Grassblades in memory of Klára Martyn* 0:47
- Waltz* 1:07
- In memoriam György Szoltsányi* 2:00

Selections from *Játékok* ("Games"), Vol. 6

- Sirenes of the Deluge* (Waiting for Noah) 0:40
- ...humble regard sur Olivier Messiaen...* 1:02
- In memoriam Tibor Szeszler* 1:05
- Doina* 1:50
- Päan* 1:07
- Marina Tsvetayeva: It's Time* 1:12
- Les Adieux (in Janáček's Manier)* 2:31



András Schiff in Lucerne
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Two masters of the miniature

András Schiff plays Scarlatti and Kurtág

It has been more than a quarter of a century: shortly before the turn of the millennium, in the summer of 1998 and autumn of 1999, András Schiff delighted the Lucerne Festival audience with a fine selection from György Kurtág's *Játékok* and over a dozen Scarlatti sonatas. Since then, a few exceptions apart, these two composers have been missing from his recital programmes. And not only at Lucerne Festival, where Schiff quickly became a regular guest with almost annual appearances since his debut in August 1990.

"Scarlatti and Kurtág haven't disappeared," Schiff explains in conversation. "They may well come back. In the meantime, I've simply been busy with other tasks. Kurtág will soon be celebrating his 100th birthday. So it was hardly surprising that I received many requests to play works from his rich body of piano music. But I'm not at all comfortable taking a composer into consideration just because of an anniversary. Nor do I feel comfortable in an environment giving 'orders', so to speak, requesting that Kurtág must suddenly be played, come what may. Instead, I want to perform his music out of my own, inner, persuasion. That's why I prefer to wait until things have calmed down again around Kurtág. And Scarlatti – my goodness, this is a treasure trove! I will definitely return to him."

Late bloomer in Spain:

Domenico Scarlatti

Domenico Scarlatti, son of the opera and church music composer Alessandro Scarlatti, only began his major creative work in the second half of his life and far away from his geographical roots. His music was radically transformed when he resigned from his position as papal *maestro di cappella* in Rome, relocating to the Iberian Peninsula as a music teacher and private harpsichordist to the Portuguese Infanta Maria Bárbara who was later to become Queen of Spain. The music of Portugal and, above all, Spain proved important influences and Scarlatti became a highly significant "Spanish" musician. This development is comparable to that of Bach's son Johann Christian, a German who worked as an "Italian" composer in London. Or that of the Greek artist Domínikos Theotókópoulos, who first developed his unique talent as a painter as El Greco in Toledo, Spain.

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András Schiff and Mieczysław Horszowski in Lucerne, 1990
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Schiff comments: “It is a great exception in the history of music that someone writes such important music so late in life (the only other examples who come to mind are Anton Bruckner or Leoš Janáček). Scarlatti broke away from his father and suddenly – as if by magic – he became a fantastic and original composer abroad. The Iberian idiom plays a major role in this. Scarlatti initially only wrote sonatas in one movement, about thirty at first, which he called “esercizi” (“exercises”). Since the research of Ralph Kirkpatrick and his brilliant monograph – one of the best ever books on music, excellently researched and written like a thriller – we know that the subsequent sonatas were mostly composed and conceived in pairs. There are also several groups of three. The pairs relate to each other in a similar manner as Bach’s preludes and fugues. Contemplative lyricism alternates with extroverted gestures.”

From the 550 plus sonatas which form the core of Scarlatti’s compositional output, Schiff designed a typically thoughtful and varied sequence for his Lucerne recital on 20 November 1999. “I respect the paired constructions. I also always organise my programmes according to keys: tonic-dominant relationships, relative or mediant keys. So it’s about harmonic relationships. For example, a piece in E flat major can never follow one in D minor.” Schiff’s Lucerne sonata selection begins in D major. This is followed by pairs of sonatas in third intervals (F major and F minor, A major and A minor, etc.) using both modes.

In his one-movement sonatas, Scarlatti demonstrates his pioneering keyboard style. Using innovative means, he brought about a keyboard evolution that would not be equalled until Frédéric Chopin and Franz Liszt. His consistently original pieces, which do not shy away from brilliant effects, demand unprecedented playing techniques such as crossing of the hands, rapid runs in thirds and sixths, leaps far beyond the range of an octave, arpeggio garlands that rush across the keyboard at breakneck speed, or rapidly repeated notes realised through constantly alternating fingers. In view of such technical demands, Scarlatti can be regarded as the true creator of the piano étude. Without ever becoming an end in itself, the virtuosity often escalates to the point of obsession. Almost every sonata consists of a single idea, clearly defined from the outset, which is then explored to its fullest extent: an almost manic adherence to a single idea of immense energy.

Some of the sonatas can certainly be regarded as tone paintings; admittedly not as programmatic music in the sense of the French clavecinists, but as pieces based on a poetic vision. This applies first and foremost to Scarlatti’s favoured idyllic groups with their pastoral character, in Schiff’s Lucerne selection represented by the C major Sonata K.513, explicitly entitled *Pastorale*. A melodic line in canon, set in $12/8$, flows along like a procession until the sweet song fades into the distance, giving way to an exuberant, even turbulent, festive mood.

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András Schiff after his debut at Lucerne Festival, 1990
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This live recording is also interesting inasmuch as Schiff's only currently available recording of Scarlatti sonatas, released in 1989 on the Decca label, contains only four of the works performed in Lucerne. For those keen on a comparison, these four sonatas will reveal any changes in Schiff's interpretation during the course of a decade or so. "I am delighted that Lucerne Festival is publishing this programme, which also makes previously unrecorded works accessible. In my youth, I recorded twelve Scarlatti sonatas for one of my first discs in Hungary (for Hungaroton). I already loved Scarlatti when I was studying with George Malcolm. And if I may say so, this repertoire also suits me well. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get to know Ralph Kirkpatrick personally, but I own all the volumes of the wonderful facsimile edition of Scarlatti's works that he edited. They are among my treasures."

"An important opinion on every note":

György Kurtág

Játékok ("Games") is the name of a steadily growing series of works for piano that György Kurtág has been working on since 1973. The Hungarian composer, who was born in 1926, follows on from *Mikrokosmos* of his compatriot Béla Bartók: *Játékok* is also a collection of short pieces that can certainly be used in piano lessons, but they were explicitly not written for this purpose. In his *Játékok*, Kurtág wanted "to formulate, with the fewest number of notes, as much and as densely as possible". And indeed, there is a playful compression here that is characteristic of aphorisms. "A brainwave, a gesture, a memory finds a counterpart in a musical structure that often lasts barely a minute and is musically extraordinarily concise." (Peter Hagmann). Or in the words of Wolfgang Sandner: "What Kurtág puts down on paper with great scruples is concise, precisely characterising, original, at times odd and decidedly pictorial, even in its sparse structures. Each of his works is carried by a dramatic impulse that arises from its condensed nature, as if every sound gesture contains its own musical cosmos."

"From this collection, which has grown by more than half since my Lucerne performance in September 1998, I play regularly" Schiff reports, "though rarely in public, but instead in lessons, with my students. Especially the pieces for four hands, which I would often perform with Heinz Holliger." While Kurtág initially had children in mind when he composed *Játékok*, the work's aspiration gradually expanded: in the meantime, the collection has become "something of a large reservoir of material", according to the composer himself. "New things, found by chance or invented at some point, are added from time to time, and the character of 'objets trouvés' applies in the broadest sense, regardless of whether they are foreign or my own,

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András Schiff rehearses in Lucerne, 1997
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or the often favoured intermediate form of the transformed, appropriated foreign object. Conversely, these 'games' are also a constantly available source of inspiration for me, from which I can draw pre-formed models, transform them, differentiate them, expand them, fan them out into a variety of voices and colours and, above all, place them into new contexts."

Many of the "games" are linked to people from Kurtág's circle of friends and acquaintances, both living and dead. "Unfortunately, I never managed to persuade Kurtág to write a piece for me," Schiff regrets. "I would probably have to die for it. When my dear mother died in 2010, Gyuri Bácsi – Uncle Gyuri, the diminutive of György: that's what people call him who know him without being on a first-name basis – immediately composed a beautiful piece for the right hand alone in memory of her, which I play from time to time. He wrote a piece called *Ligatura* for my wife Yuuko (thank God she's still alive!). No joke: Kurtág's collections resemble a large cemetery."

When Schiff entered the Liszt Academy in Budapest at the age of 14, he was under the tutelage of Pál Kadosa, and also studied for several years with György Kurtág, Kadosa's assistant at the time. When I asked whether he worked with Kurtág later on, possibly even in the run-up to his Lucerne recital at the time, Schiff replied: "By then, I no longer lived in Hungary. However, I would always play something for him or send him a recording. Sometimes it was enough to play something to him over the phone. It was a trademark of his never to be satisfied with any sound. But we love him just the way he is. And I pay tribute to a composer who has an important opinion on every note and knows exactly how he hears it. Hardly anyone plays the piano as fantastically as Kurtág. All he needs is a pianino in the Budapest Music Centre. A grand piano is too big and too loud for him. He plays as though the piano were equipped with a damper pedal for practising purposes. He plays incredibly beautifully on this instrument and produces wonderful colours."

Schiff's Lucerne selection from volumes 5 and 6 of *Játékok* followed advice from the composer himself. "I asked Kurtág for programme suggestions at the time. He replied with a letter (which is in my private archive), providing me with lists of possible combinations of works. These also applied to other concerts I was playing at the time. Furthermore, the letter contained suggestions for sequences of pieces for four hands. I didn't follow Kurtág's suggestions down to the last detail, but I did design the programmes in his spirit."

Erich Singer

Translation: Viola Scheffel

András Schiff

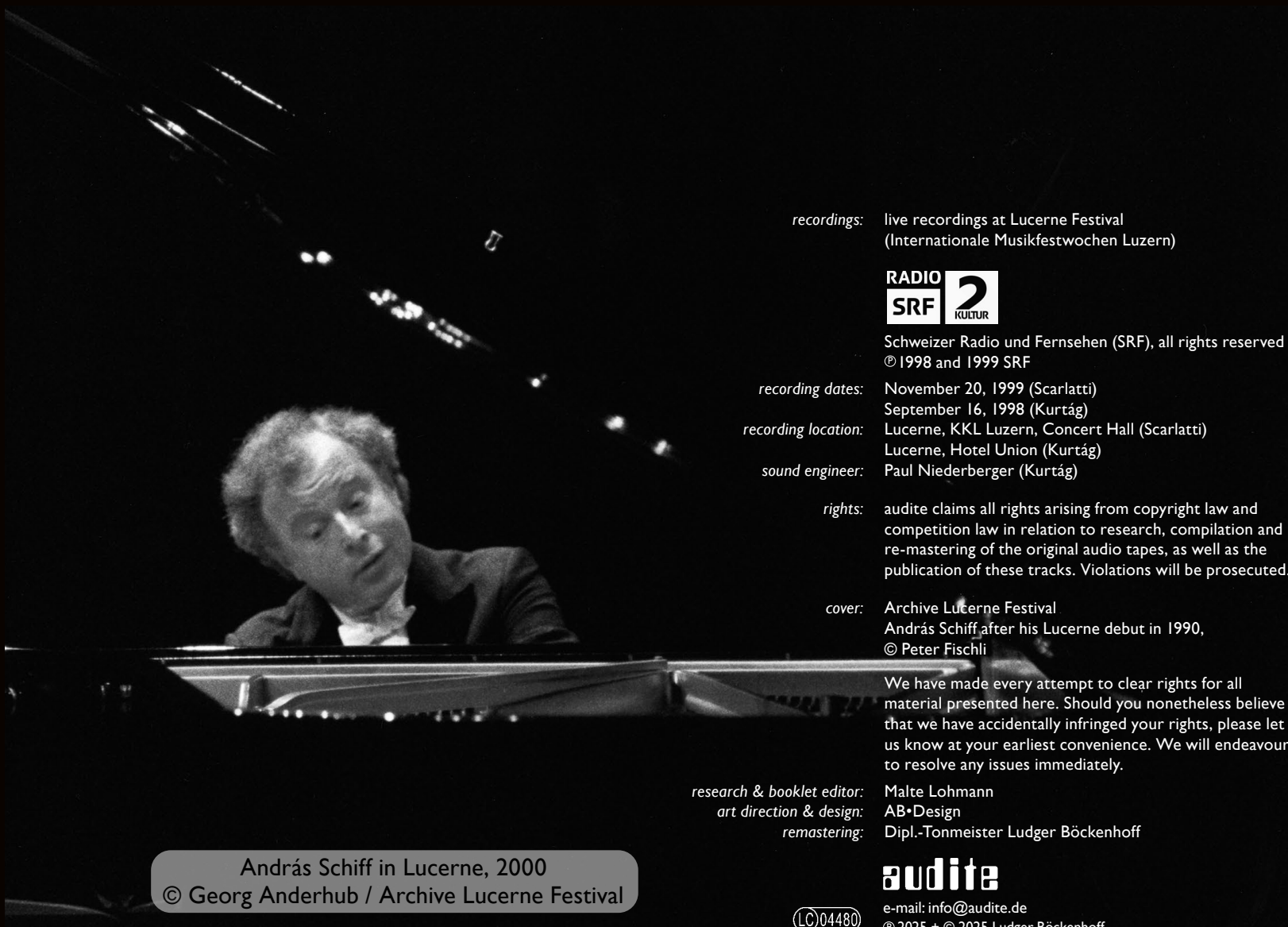
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András Schiff in Lucerne, November 1999
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András Schiff after his Lucerne debut in 1990,
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