

PROGRAM NOTES

György Kurtág: *Selections from Játékok (Games)*

The odd voicing of a familiar chord, making it unrecognizable. An unfamiliar chord, strangely arpeggiated, somehow made familiar. A simple idea, simply stated, then abandoned. A scale, brushed and left to waft in the air. A single note, repeated mercilessly – attempts to leave it fail. And form? Well, it's not Haydn....

So, what is a listener to make of these tiny piano pieces? And what are we to make of their creator, György Kurtág?

One way is to take seriously the words from the composer's preface to the first four volumes of this nine-volume collection that has spanned 44 years (1973–2017), "The idea of composing *Játékok* was suggested by children playing spontaneously, children for whom the piano still means a toy." But this is no *Kinderszenen*. Unlike Schumann's pieces, they are not mood-evoking "character pieces" – and, at the level of an individual "piece," there is hardly an occasional hint of traditional form. One piece in Volume 8, "Flowers We Are, Mere Flowers," consists of just seven notes.

More importantly, the method Kurtág uses here is not something that applies only to these piano pieces. Critic Tom Service has accurately summarized Kurtág's compositional method as "reducing music to the level of the fragment, the moment, with individual pieces or movements lasting mere seconds, or a minute, perhaps two." Kurtág has used this approach consistently in his entire oeuvre throughout his life as a composer, beginning with his time in Paris in 1957–58 when he became acquainted with the works of Arnold Schoenberg and, especially, the aphoristic works of Anton Webern. We don't know for certain, but it's possible that in Paris Olivier Messiaen or Pierre Boulez provided Kurtág with some of the published essays of Schoenberg. One of these essays, "A Self-Analysis," first published in 1948, contains a passage that perfectly describes György Kurtág's compositional method and provides a key to these piano pieces:

[Since around 1920] I wrote in the extreme short forms. Although I did not dwell very long in this style, it taught me two things: first, to formulate ideas in an aphoristic manner, which did not require continuations out of formal reasons; secondly, to link ideas together without the use of formal connections, merely by juxtaposition.

With Kurtág the listener is presented with what Schoenberg called "aphorism and juxtaposition." The fragments don't relate in any traditional way; there is no line; there isn't even a well-hidden developing variation from one to another. (For those with a music theory background: Kurtág is the ultimate anti-Schenker.)

So the listener is left with a challenge, and may hear something like the moment-by-moment personal analysis in our first paragraph (although that's over-thinking it a bit), or something entirely different, or not "hearing" anything at all, just listening, letting each fragment wash over the moment.

Stephen Soderberg

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Johannes Brahms: *String Sextet No. 2 in G*

It is no secret to musicologists by now that Johannes Brahms coded a valediction in the first movement to Agathe Siebold, whom he ought to have married, but, clumsily – and painfully for both of them – did not. Clearly, he did not take the end of the affair lightly: the G-major Sextet was only begun five years later (in 1864). So, in the first movement, we can find the following musical cipher, which reads ‘Agathe ade’ [Agatha farewell]: .



Much of what’s musically crucial in the rest of the piece can be found in this small phrase. First, there is the stepwise motion of A-G-A and D-E, and second, there are the falling fifths, A-D and H-E [H=B]. Both of these elements can be found throughout the piece, beginning with its first bars. A relationship to the ‘A-G-A-D-E A-D-E’ idea can also be found explicitly in the opening of the third movement, in which moving fifths become rising fourths (a sort of double inversion); the second violin plays a line



which falls like the D-C# at the end of the cipher; and the viola oscillates like the A-G-A.

That all said, there’s not exactly a program to the work. One can’t say at any point, ‘This is the part where he drops the ball (à la Berlioz)’ or ‘This is where he picks himself up by the bootstraps and gets back on his feet.’ In fact, Agathe’s place in his life has more to do with her growing absence from the piece than with her initial coded presence. The relationship of Brahms to notes becomes more important than the relationship of Brahms to Agathe, and in the end the relationships of notes to notes become paramount. A brief look at the score will tell some of the story of how the themes oscillate, equivocate, and jump from part to part. And amidst the many possible patterns of six parallel parts, Agathe and her cipher fade quickly into the texture.



Tim Summers

Toshio Hosokawa: *Im Nebel for trumpet and piano*

Toshio Hosokawa’s concerto for trumpet and orchestra, *Im Nebel*, premiered by Jereon Berwaerts at The Suntory Foundation for Arts Summer Festival in 2013. Much of Hosokawa’s recent work is engaged in exploring the relationships between man and nature, and *Im Nebel* is no exception.

The poem inspiring this work was penned by Hermann Hesse in 1905. But more than an inspiration, Hesse’s poem has a loosely programmatic/form-inducing relationship to Hosokawa’s music. This is very similar to the relationship between Richard Dehmal’s poem and Arnold Schoenberg’s sextet, *Verklärte Nacht*. So, on several levels, it’s helpful for the listener to read Hesse’s poem.

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*Strange, to wander in the fog!
Every bush and stone is lonely,
No tree sees the other,
Each is alone.*

*My world was full of friends
When my life was still light;
Now, as the fog falls,
No one is visible anymore.*

*Truly, no one is wise
Who does not know the darkness
That inescapably and quietly
Separates him from everything.*

*Strange, to wander in fog!
Life is loneliness.
No one knows the other,
Each is alone.*

(Engl. tr. S.S.)

The connections, summarized in the words of the composer:

The trumpet represents man, and the orchestra [here in a piano reduction] represents nature and the mist that surrounds it. In the vast, blind world, the trumpeter walks alone; then sings to the world while keeping to itself the memories of the glorious past and the intense storm. The soloist's trumpet eventually lets itself fade into the world of mist, simultaneously confronting and reconciling with the world.

Stephen Soderberg

Arnold Schoenberg: *Verklärte Nacht*

To most of those who recognize it on a concert program, the name 'Arnold Schoenberg' carries connotations that might charitably be described as 'mixed'. Cold overtones of abstraction and exaggerated theorizing hang in the air before a note is played. But whatever force drove Schoenberg through his musical life and works, it certainly wasn't a cold one... and whatever force drove him to write *Verklärte Nacht* was frankly overheated with all sorts of passions: for music, for poetry, for lust, for love, and all sorts of other things which suffer when assigned a name.

The full title of Schoenberg's work in manuscript is *Verklärte Nacht von Richard Dehmel*, which indicates that the poet has been given first rank in its musical meaning.



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And it is true in practice: to hear Schoenberg's string sextet with knowledge and awareness of the text to which it refers, is to know that *Verklärte Nacht* is an extraordinary spilling over of word and meaning into music.

To begin, then, a bit of poetic background: Dehmel's poem is in five parts:

- *Two people walk in the woods. The moon follows.*
- A woman's voice speaks — she carries a child from an affair with a 'stranger'
- *She walks in the woods, stumbling. The moon follows.*
- A man's voice speaks — he accepts child and universe
- *The two walk together in the woods, and the night is bright.*

How precisely Schoenberg matches words to musical text could be the subject of some research and argument, but some relationships are unmistakable. Walking-darkly-in-the-woods is connected to a falling line over long pulses (or steps) in the cellos. This material appears three times in the music, parallel to the 'walking' parts of the poem (the first, third, and fifth sections). The 'woman's voice' (of section 2) is clearly marked by a desperate viola solo, with which the words "Ich trag ein Kind, und nit von Dir" ("I carry a child, but not from you") match stress-for-stress. The 'man's voice', which marks a transformative midpoint to the poem, is marked just as clearly by a generous solo from the cello; this deep voice plainly opens up the universe and the night. And even beyond these milestones, the passionate inner conflicts of the woman — conflicts between desire, longing, sin, and real consequence — make a plain, and plainly erotic, impression. The characters' opening-up to the brightness of the universe is just as palpable as their struggle. In these ways, the plot is laid bare.

It probably would be a loss, though, to go too far with merely analytical thinking, even if it's only literary. There are fine and wonderful details to be found in reading, hearing, re-reading, and re-hearing... but there's only so much time. And to lose the time of a performance to speculating "This must be the part where X happens" might just bring the name 'Arnold Schoenberg' back out into the cold, dark, night, where it doesn't belong.

If that isn't convincing, it's worth bearing in mind that Richard Dehmel himself wrote to Schoenberg after the premiere: 'I had intended to follow the motives of my text in your composition, but soon forgot to do so, I was so enthralled by the music.' And of course he was right to forget to do so. To be enthralled is also to follow the piece, which carries in its text, subtext, and tone something powerful about what it means to be enthralled, by music, by text, or by longing.

Tim Summers

