

## Communication between the Present and the Past. Multi-Referentiality in György Kurtág's *HOMMAGE à R. Sch.*, Op. 15d

**Abstract.** György Kurtág's compositional style can be described as being influenced from many sources, schools, traditions and even epochs. Kurtág was inspired by the music of his teachers and contemporaries, as well as by the works and techniques of composers of past centuries and also by extra-musical, especially literary models. On the one hand, the reductionist aesthetic of the Second Viennese School, as it emerged in the 1910s, plays an important role in his works; on the other hand, allusions recognizably following the Bartók tradition are also present in them.

The multiplicity and diversity of these sources of inspiration allowed the composer to develop a musical language all his own, which in its multi-referentiality can be understood as communication between the present and the past. With his *HOMMAGE à R. Sch.*, Op. 15d (1990), Kurtág created a particularly vivid example of this.

The text wishes to show how in this cycle of six miniatures in small chamber music instrumentation, a network of references to sources of inspiration is created both on the formal and harmonic-contrapuntal level, which is by no means limited to the music of Robert Schumann. The compositions are also inspired by J. S. Bach, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Franz Kafka and even Guillaume de Machaut. In view of the density of information Kurtág creates in the miniatures, it seems impossible to fully grasp the multitude of allusions and references they contain on a single listening and without any knowledge at all of the originals to which they refer. However, Kurtág's handling of the various degrees of clarity of the allusions contained in his compositions is elegant: He seldom uses direct quotations, but rather operates between the lines, which often achieves the effect of receiving something new, but nevertheless familiar and understandable when listening to the music. Kurtág thus elevates his compositional style to something higher: to a musical language whose designation as such can be taken literally in his case, and which subtly foregrounds one of the most central and fundamental functions of music of all—communication.

**Keywords:** György Kurtág, musical analysis, chamber music, multi-referentiality, homage.

The way a composer looks at music history or the history of composition, at historical techniques, sources and music theory and what insights he draws from his observations, in what way he is inspired by them and how he deals with them productively and creatively, how he identifies with the traditional, individualizes it and places it in the contexts of the present—in short: how he communicates with the past, represents an essential human trait and thus decisively shapes the personal compositional style. Hardly any other case shows this as clearly and vividly as György Kurtág's (b. 1926) oeuvre. After his basic education in Hungary, which resulted in musical references to the Bartók tradition latently omnipresent in his works, Kurtág spent time in Paris in 1857/58, where he came into contact with Darius Milhaud (1892–1974) and Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992), among others. In Paris, he intensively studied the serial music of Pierre Boulez (1925–2016) as well as its historical roots, the music of the Second Viennese School, whereby he was particularly fascinated and inspired by the reductionist aesthetics of the 1910s and the hyperconstructive nature of Anton Webern's twelve-tone rows. The fundamentally different places and traditions of Kurtág's education led to an unmistakable tonal language, which is expressed by a real conscientiousness regarding the permanence of an (often simultaneous) execution of the most diverse direct allusions to the past resp. historical sources of inspiration. Not all of these allusions and quasi citations can be heard at once, but Kurtág's music can be described as not even intended to be fully understandable after listening to it only once. This kind of musical density and complexity affords a special analytical approach, which includes formal, harmonic, and contrapuntal aspects. The following is a possible approach of analyzing the multi-referential and multi-dimensional communication between the present and the past in Kurtág's *HOMMAGE à R. Sch.*, Op. 15d from a music-analytical perspective—a work that bears the initials of Robert Schumann and thus a clear reference to a composer of the past already in its title.

I would like to begin directly in the past, with two sources of reference that can possibly be described as indirectly omnipresent in Kurtág's compositions, the compositional works and styles by Johann Sebastian Bach and Robert Schumann. The opening bars of the Prélude from Bach's *English Suite* No. 3 in G minor as well as an excerpt from the middle section of "Albumbblatt III" in A-flat major from Schumann's *Bunte Blätter*, Op. 99 may serve as examples for this. These two musical examples shall be juxtaposed to the second movement from Kurtág's Op. 15d, subtitled "(E[usebius].: der begrenzte Kreis ...)" (E[usebius]: the closed circle ...).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

1a) 

1b) 

1c) 

Figures 1a)–c). J. S. Bach, Prélude from *English Suite No. 3* in G Minor, BWV 808, bars 1–7,  
 R. Schumann, “Albumblatt III” in A flat Major from *Bunte Blätter*, Op. 99, bars 18–24,  
 and G. Kurtág, *HOMMAGE à R. Sch.*, Op. 15d, 2nd movement, “E[usebius]: der begrenzte Kreis ...”  
 (clarinet part not transposing, with additional analytical remarks).<sup>2</sup>

According to Jan Michiels (2005), there are “mysterious bands that cannot be articulated” (7), bands which connect these three compositions with each other. Without question, they are fundamentally different in their effect; they come from three very different composer-characters, moreover from different epochs far removed from each other in time. Bach’s Prélude describes with great gesture the solemn and virtuosic beginning of a full-blown Baroque piano suite lasting almost half an hour. Schumann’s “Albumblatt III,” on the other hand, is much more introverted: with its quasi-waltz accompaniment, the passage under consideration

<sup>2</sup> Reproduced after source Bach 1971, 36, Schumann 1885, 8, and Kurtág 1996, 5.

is a synthesis of folksiness and sophisticated counterpoint being typical of Schumann's Romantic musical language. Finally, Kurtág's second movement from Op. 15d is a composition from the second half of the 20th century, which on the one hand seems to be at the height of the times with its score and its sounding, but at the same time visibly and audibly contains anachronisms. For example, the instrumentation of the piece—clarinet, viola and piano—corresponds to that of Schumann's *Märchenerzählungen*, Op. 132 (Spangemacher 1998, 219). In addition, the composition's brevity and compositional density evoke memories of the aphorisms of the music of Anton Webern.<sup>3</sup>

At second glance, however, when looking at the scores, it becomes clear what all three examples have in common: the individualized imitative procedures used in each of them. In none of the three excerpts is there an "ordinary" imitation in the prime, fourth, fifth or octave according to the traditional theoretical canon.

In Bach's composition, the change from a polyphonic structure to a structure that can be described as melody and accompaniment is completed within only 7 bars at the beginning. The transition seems nevertheless organic. All the individual voices are starting one after the other, with a linear progression from the highest to the lowest voice. In bars 1–5, an arrangement of the voices in pairs is presented: the left hand is first a literal imitation of the right hand in the octave. In addition, the second and fourth voices imitate the rhythm and the course of the melodic curve of the first and third voices. The fact that the upper voice is the only part that changes to semiquavers from bar 3 onwards creates the conditions for an organic transition to a melody accompanied by chords as a new structure, which can be interpreted as such from b. 5 onwards. Another exquisite detail is that the semiquaver "melody" gradually detaches itself from its imitative context: in bars 3 and 4, it is still based on the "scaffolding tones" of the octave imitation, merely fleshed out by upper and lower neighbor notes—a characteristic that is lost immediately afterwards. The semiquaver figures thus have their origin in the opening quavers.

The passage from Schumann's piano piece also contains an individualization of imitative techniques: a canonic procedure as well as a structure that can be described as a melody with waltz accompaniment are interwoven here. Both structures are coexistent and can be consciously pushed into the foreground or into the background, depending on the listening sensation. This is also an imitation in the octave, this time between the upper voice and the middle voice. The latter, however, has the peculiarity that its rhythm follows the pattern of the violas in an orchestral setting in a typical waltz accompaniment. In this way, the wide-ranging octave imitation only comes clearly to the fore relatively late, namely in bar 20, where the preceding melodic variant of the right hand with the rhythm dotted quaver plus semiquaver is also literally taken over by the middle voice.

In addition, the relatively simple harmony at this point overlays Schumann's contrapuntal sophistication: the entire section proceeds during a sequence of falling fifths, a sequential model whose audible "predictability" distracts the listener from complex contrapuntal structures. The fundamental notes of that sequence are marked in figure 1b).

The imitative procedure in Kurtág's example is at least as complex. This is a three-part canon in the prime. All three voices begin at a distance of a quaver from each other. However, the canon is not consistently brought to a close, which is indicated solely by the clearly smaller number of notes in the clarinet part compared to the other two voices. Other conspicuous imitative moments after the clarinet's last note, the E in bar 2, which is sustained to the end, are, however, present between the viola and the piano, such as the succession of two ascending fifths in the same bar and the subsequent minor seventh between G# and A#.

The double stops of the viola in bar 1 also show that there are additional notes in this part compared to the clarinet part. In turn, these double stops are part of the imitation of the piano part. Thus, with regard to the quantity of tones, a clear hierarchy of instruments emerges, in which the piano takes the first position, followed by the viola and finally the clarinet. Under these conditions, the structure described can also be interpreted in reverse: although the piano part enters last, the entire tone material of the piece is contained within itself. The viola and clarinet parts emerge from it as two different degrees of reduction. The clarinet part represents the extreme, it is a reduction to the core statement of the piece. In this respect, it forms the main voice, the *dux* in the sense of the imitative procedure. It thus becomes a speaking instrument.

<sup>3</sup> See Bleek 2008.

In the score, Kurtág underlays the notes of the clarinet with the words of the character Eusebius, invented by Schumann: “(... der begrenzte Kreis ist Rein ...)” (... the closed circle is pure ...). However, this is not an Eusebius quotation from Schumann’s pen, as one might assume, but a line from Franz Kafka, whose texts Kurtág dealt with several times in his compositions. And last but not least, Kurtág refers to himself here, namely to his *Kafka-Fragmente*, Op. 24: in the sixth piece of the third part of that composition for soprano and violin from 1985/86, the composer has already set the same words to music (Sallis 2002, 312). The eighteenth piece from the first part of the *Kafka-Fragmente* also has the subtitle “Hommage à Schumann.”<sup>4</sup>

But back to the second movement from Op. 15d: it may be no coincidence that with the entry of the word “Rein” (pure), which Kurtág capitalizes, two successive perfect fifths (in German: *reine Quinten*) appear in the viola part. The perfect fifth plays a role several times within the piece, for example, they are functioning as the fundament of the concluding major triads in the viola part and in the piano part. This last imitation between A major and C sharp major can also be interpreted as an imitation in the major third.

Kurtág’s compositional technique in this piece presents itself as a tightrope walk between strict imitation and free counterpoint. And this is where the actual homage to Schumann is revealed: quotations are by no means only superficially incorporated into the composition and “reeled off”, rather they exist on a much deeper level, hidden in details. They are communication wires between Kurtág and the musical past with which he himself strongly identifies and to which he bows down with his homage.

What emerges from the investigation of imitative procedures also confirms the definition of the tone material. The sound impression of the piece is alternately determined by two moments: on the one hand, there are agglomerations of semitones that come to the fore (at the beginning of the piece as well as at the end of bar 2); on the other hand, there are regions whose tonal arrangement can be traced back to a layering of thirds (see bar 2, with upbeat as well as bar 3). The semitone sections and the thirds sections sound very different and form almost tonal antipoles. They are marked with different colors in figure 1c).

The piece begins with a tonal field whose tonal qualities, arranged in ascending order, produce a cluster from F to B. Furthermore, there are two groups of five tones that can be described as superimposed layers of two major triads. These are two transpositions of one and the same group of tones, the first of which has the “keynote” C, the second the “keynote” D. The center of the final tone is the tone G#, which is also the first tone of the canon at the beginning of the piece. Thus, the circle is closed.

Kurtág, born on 19 February 1926, along with György Ligeti, probably the most important Hungarian composer of the post-war era, wrote his *HOMMAGE à R. Sch.* over a very long period of time: the six movements were composed between 1975 and 1990. They are titled as follows:

- 1st movement: “(merkwürdige Pirouetten des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler)” (strange pirouettes of the Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler),
- 2nd movement: “(E[usebius].: der begrenzte Kreis ...)” (E[usebius].: the limited circle ...),
- 3rd movement: “(... und wieder zuckt es schmerzlich F[lorestan] um die Lippen ...)” (... and again it twitches painfully F[lorestan] around the lips ...),
- 4th movement: “(eine Wolke war ich, jetzt scheint schon die Sonne ...) (Fragment-Fragment)” ([I was a cloud, now the sun is already shining ...] [fragment-fragment]),
- 5th movement: “In der Nacht” (In the night),
- 6th movement: “Abschied (Meister Raro entdeckt Guillaume de Machaut)” (Farewell [Master Raro discovers Guillaume de Machaut]).<sup>5</sup>

The complexity of the allusions contained in the titles of the individual movements is striking. It ranges from direct quotations to free adaptations of romantic topoi such as night and farewell. In the opening movement, Kurtág describes almost pictorially the movements of a personality who, in the broadest sense, comes from Schumann’s environment: the Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler is a fictional character who appears in several works by the music writer E. T. A. Hoffmann, for example in the *Phantasiestücke in Callot’s Manier* (Hoffmann 1819), written in 1814/15, as well as in the *Lebensansichten des Katers Murr* (Hoffmann 1820–1822), written in 1819/21. Parallels to works or work titles by Schumann are noticeable here in several respects: not only did Schumann compose numerous *Phantasiestücke*, but he also dedicated the famous piano

<sup>4</sup> Compare Spangemacher 1998, 223.

<sup>5</sup> Own translations, see also Sallis 2002, 312.

cycle *Kreiseriana*, Op. 16, composed in 1838, to the fictitious Kapellmeister.<sup>6</sup> Schumann’s piano cycle, in turn, is named after the chapters of the same name from Hoffmann’s *Phantasiestücke* (Hoffmann 1819, 285ff).

Hoffmann gives the Kapellmeister brooding and melancholic features in his writings. With him, he paints the picture of a typical Romantic musician’s character. Kurtág’s musical illustration of the figure of Johannes Kreisler in the opening movement of Op. 15d, on the other hand, stands in contrast to this. With its numerous semiquaver figures, the piece seems lively, turbulent and playful, even parodic.<sup>7</sup>

According to the German dictionary *Duden* (1989), a pirouette is a “quick turn around one’s own axis on the supporting leg”.<sup>8</sup> If one examines Kreisler’s clearly perceptible pirouettes, it turns out that Kurtág seems to follow this definition down to the last detail. The first semiquaver figure in the clarinet part may serve as an example to illustrate this. It is unmistakably evident from figures 2a) and b) how Kreisler turns around himself, whereby after half a turn, after reaching the high note Bb (sounding Ab) the way back to the starting position is described by the reverse order of the notes.

2a)

2b)

Figures 2a) and b). Tone material and arrangement of “pirouettes” in G. Kurtág, *HOMMAGE à R. Sch.*, Op. 15d, 2nd movement, “E[usebius]: der begrenzte Kreis ...”, compare also Kurtág 1996, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Schumann, Robert, undated [1838].

<sup>7</sup> See Kurtág 1996, 4f.

<sup>8</sup> Own translation, original: “schnelle Drehung um die eigene Achse auf dem Standbein”, Drosdowski et al. (eds.) 1989, 1153.

The tonal material of the semiquaver figure, placed in a normal order according to pitch-class set theory, again consists of a sequence of semitones, this time comprising eight notes (see figure 2a), I). Kurtág, however, distributes the individual tones of the chromatic scale among different registers, so that the chromaticism is interrupted by two augmented fifths. After the first three notes B, C and C#, there follows a group of two notes A and B, followed by another group of three notes F#, G and G#.<sup>9</sup> In this way, there is not only a symmetry on the rhythmic level, but also with regard to the arrangement of the notes. A horizontal axis, which lies exactly between the notes A and B, divides the tone material mirror-inverted into two equal-interval halves.

In the course of the piece, a total of four different variants of the pirouette figure occur (see figure 2b)). The changes primarily concern the tonal range; only rarely is the rhythm altered, for example in the piano part or at the end of the piece in the clarinet part, where only half a pirouette is described.

Variant II is heard in the viola. It differs from variant I only in that the first three notes are transposed down a semitone. Variant III (found in the clarinet part) has one tone less than variants I and II. It can be described as variant I without the opening note B. Variant IV is used in the piano part and is composed of the tone material of variant III as well as some subsequent notes. All the notes used in this variation are also found in variant I, with the exception of the notes D and F. The clarinet's final pirouette (the "half pirouette") is again made up of the tone material of variation I. It is interesting that the axis A and B is maintained in all variants. All the turns therefore run around one and the same center.

Figure 2b) also provides an overview of the individual variants and their placement in the course of the piece. With regard to the arrangement of the entries and the choice of variants, a traditional pattern emerges, which amounts to a climax in a conventional position. With regard to the clarinet and viola, the pattern of a symmetry shifted in favor of the dramaturgy is still recognizable.

Two further associations from the multiverse of references in and around Kurtág's chamber music cycle Op. 15d may be picked out in conclusion. One of them can be found in the third volume of Béla Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* (1987): Bartók writes two homages in direct succession here, one attributed to Johann Sebastian Bach and the other one to Robert Schumann (No. 79 and No. 80). Both Bartók and Kurtág imitate certain stylistic characteristics of the composers and transfer them into the tonal environment of their own musical present. One searches in vain for direct quotations; rather, Bach and Schumann seem latently omnipresent by means of this technique. The abbreviation of the composers' names—J. S. B. and R. Sch.—found in Bartók's pieces, may also have served as a model for Kurtág.

Another association in Op. 15d, which shall be mentioned in conclusion, is related to Gustav Mahler's *Lied von der Erde* (The song of the earth) (1912). This cycle also consists of six movements, and its final movement is also entitled "Der Abschied" (The farewell). As in Mahler's large-scale work, Kurtág's last movement is by far the longest.<sup>10</sup> Its calmly flowing character is due to an additional reference to even older polyphonic compositional techniques, such as those found in the music of Guillaume de Machaut. Despite its contemplative character, the movement acts as a final climax in the dramaturgical course of Op. 15d.

Kurtág ends the cycle with a special poetic gesture. In the clarinet part, shortly before the end, it says: "muta in gran cassa" (Kurtág 1996, 17). With a single *pianissimo* beat of the bass drum, which is never used before, Kurtág musically extinguishes the light.

Kurtág's cycle of six miniatures includes a network of references to sources of inspiration, both on the formal and the harmonic-contrapuntal level. In Op. 15d, Kurtág does not only refer to Robert Schumann, whose initials are to be found in the title of Op. 15d, but also to other composers of the past, such as Guillaume de Machaut, Bach, Bartók, and Mahler. In addition, poetic threads to the field of literature are spun within the work, being present as several allusions to E. T. A. Hoffmann and citations by Franz Kafka. Analyzing Kurtág's work reveals that the resulting analysis is not only justified as such, but is even a fundamental prerequisite for a deeper understanding of its musical language. As it can be assumed that musical discourse is as old as music itself, Kurtág thus creates a very original, but also pure and natural form of communication between the present and the past.

<sup>9</sup> Here and below the sounding notes are given.

<sup>10</sup> See also Michiels 2005, 6.

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## Komunikacija tarp dabarties ir praities.

### Daugialypių nuorodų tinklas György Kurtágo kūrinyje *HOMMAGE à R. Sch., op. 15d*

#### Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojamas György Kurtágo *HOMMAGE à R. Sch., op. 15d*, išryškinamas kūrinyje slypinčių kompozicinių nuorodų į muzikinės tradicijos sudėtingumas ir įvairiapusiškumas. Paprastai tokios nuorodos – ne tiesioginės praities epochų meistrų citatos, kurias kompozitorius įtraukia į savo kūrinį, o veikiau netiesioginės aliuzijos, dažnai skaitomos tarp eilučių.

Šiuo požiūriu Johanno Sebastianio Bacho ir Roberto Schumanno harmoninių ir kontrapunktinių-imitacinių procedūrų individualizacijas galima apibūdinti kaip Kurtágo sukurtų modelių pirmtakus. Tai iliustruojama lyginant op. 15d antrąją dalį su J. S. Bacho Preljudu iš *Angliškosios siuitos* Nr. 3 g-moll, BWV 808, taip pat su R. Schumanno III „Albumo lapeliu“ „As-dur iš „Spalvotų lapelių“ (*Bunte Blätter*), op. 99. Šiuolaikinę Kurtágo individualizaciją galima apibūdinti kaip darbą su matematiniais poibiais: klarneto partijos natos yra alto partijos redukcija, kuri savo ruožtu yra fortepijono partijos redukcija. Tonalumo požiūriu veiksminga yra chromatiškai determinuotų pasažų ir atkarpu, kuriose dominuoja tercijų sluoksniai, kaita.

Pirmoje kūrinio dalyje žavi taikli jau pavadinimo pasufleruoto vaizdinio muzikinė realizacija: „nejprasti kapelmeisterio Johannesio Kreislerio piruetai“ atsekami iki smulkmenų (be kita ko, dėl simetriško toninės medžiagos išdėstymo). Taip pat čia galima aptikti nuorodų į tradicinę formą: piruetų figūrų išdėstymas implikuoja ekspozicijos, perdurbimo ir reprizos dalių seką.

Straipsnyje trumpai aptariamasi ir nuorodos į kitus *HOMMAGE à R. Sch.* atpažįstamus modelius: į Ernstą Theodorą Amadeus'ą Hoffmanną, Franzą Kafka, Béla'ą Bartóką, o paskutinėje dalyje – į Gustavą Mahlerį ir Guillaume'ą de Machaut.