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How to become a Soviet composer?

György Kurtág's experiment with a new cultural identity (1976–1986)

Anna Dalos

It is the best Soviet music”: this is how György Ligeti appraised ironically György Kurtág's *Double Concerto* (op. 27 no. 2) written in 1989–1990.¹ Kurtág recalled Ligeti's remark, which „represented the typical attitude of the Hungarian musical community towards Soviet music, with a smile. Convinced of their supremacy in modern music as successors to Bartók's inheritance, Hungarian musicians disdained Soviet music, even though they knew relatively little about it. While the music journal *Muzsika*, the most progressive, western-orientated forum of new music in Hungary, dwelt on the first performances of Nono's, Stockhausen's, Boulez's works or events in the life of the Polish avantgarde, it hardly ever mentioned the names of Soviet contemporary composers. It was news of minor importance when Dmitri Kabalevsky or Aram Khachaturian visited Hungary in 1968.² When Arvo Pärt's *Symphony* was first performed in Budapest in 1970, a critic discussed at length the right pronunciation of the composer's name written as „Pjart” in the programme booklet, but failed to say anything noteworthy about the piece itself.³ The same year an interview with Edison Denisov was published there taken over from a western news-agency.⁴ Apparently the editors were unable to find Hungarian journalists who would have been willing to make an interview with the composer.

The reception of Shostakovich's music suffered most from the fact that in the Hungarian musical discourse Soviet music was eliminated from the canon of new music. As Kurtág puts it: “at that time Shostakovich was someone to strike against. Nowadays I find many beautiful

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¹ András Bálint Varga, *Kurtág György*, Budapest: Holnap 2009, p. 65.

² “Kabalevskij Budapesten vezényli Requiemjét” [Kabalevsky conducts his Requiem in Budapest], in: *Muzsika* 6 (1968), p. 46; “Hacsaturján Budapesten” [Khachaturian in Budapest], in: *Muzsika* 7 (1968), p. 1–2.

³ R. I. [István Raics], “Vendégművészek” [Guest Artists], in: *Muzsika* 6 (1970), p. 36–37.

⁴ János Breuer “Új szépséget kell keresnünk. Beszélgetés Edison Denisovval” [We have to search for a new beauty. A Conversation with Edison Denisov], in: *Muzsika* 10 (1970), p. 20–21.

things in his music.”⁵ Although Kurtág admitted that he didn’t know Shostakovich’s oeuvre, he found the *Four Poems of Captain Lebiadkin* (op. 146, 1974) “fascinating”. Hungarian musicians neglected Shostakovich’s music because it represented for them typical Soviet music, that is, the music of the oppressors of Hungary. To dislike, Shostakovich symbolized a kind of resistance. When Shostakovich died, the state music publishing company brought out a book in remembrance of the composer which was modelled on a very popular book issued in memory of Stravinsky four years earlier.⁶ As the editor of the second volume had to face the fact that no Hungarian composer would write about Shostakovich, he had to rest contented with cultural politicians and ideologists of music.

It was quite embarrassing in this context that György Kurtág decided to write a cycle to Russian words for soprano and chamber orchestra. It is a well-known fact that Kurtág made up his mind to undertake intensive Russian studies while the Russian translation of the record version of his vocal concerto, *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*, was prepared. Kurtág got acquainted with the short poems of the Russian translator Rimma Dalos that inspired him so much that between 1975 and 1986 he composed four cycles after the works of the Russian poetess living in Hungary. He composed the *Messages of the Late R. V. Trousova* (op. 17) between 1975 and 1980, *Omaggio a Luigi Nono* (op. 16) in 1979, *Scenes from a Novel* (op. 19) between 1979 and 1982, and *Requiem for the Beloved* (op. 26) between 1982 and 1986. Other Russian poets served him as inspiration, too: he was working on his cycle *The Songs of Dispair and Sorrow* (op. 18) between 1980 and 1994 (making use of poems by Lermontov, Blok, Yesenin, Mandelstam, Achmatova), and composed *Four Achmatova-Songs* (op. 41) between 1997 and 2008. There are also some shorter songs, fragments in Russian, that have not been included in any cycles.⁷

As Stephen Walsh put it, it is very unusual for a Hungarian composer to use Russian texts in his compositions.⁸ According to a Hungarian musicologist Kurtág’s colleagues in Budapest even made jokes about Kurtág’s choice of language, fully in agreement with Ligeti’s previously mentioned statement (“It is the best Soviet music”).⁹ As an ardent admirer of Dostoevsky’s oeuvre, Kurtág expressed that Russian was a sacred language to him, like Latin to Stravinsky.¹⁰ In spite of it Stephen Walsh, Dina Lentsner and Julia Galieva-Szokolay noticed unanimously that the parallel between Stravinsky’s and Kurtág’s use of language was not appro-

⁵ Varga, *Kurtág*, p. 110.

⁶ János Breuer (ed.), *In memoriam Dmitrij Sosztakovics*, Budapest: Zeneműkiadó 1976; Dorrit Révész (ed.), *In memoriam Igor Stravinsky*, Budapest: Zeneműkiadó 1972.

⁷ In connection with Kurtág’s Russian settings see Julia Galieva-Szokolay’s study: “Dirges and Ditties: György Kurtág’s Latest Settings of Poetry by Anna Akhmatova”, in: *Centre and Periphery, Roots and Exile*, ed. by Friedemann Sallis (et al.), Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press 2011, p. 279–302, here p. 280.

⁸ Stephen Walsh, “György Kurtág: An Outline Study II”, in: *Tempo New Series* 142 (1982), p. 10–19, here p. 14.

⁹ István Balázs, “A magánélet börtönében. Kurtág György két művéről” [In the Prison of Private Life. About two compositions of György Kurtág], in: *Tisztelet Kurtág Györgynek* [An Homage to György Kurtág], ed. by Domokos Moldován, Budapest: Rózsavölgyi 2006, p. 161–189, here p. 167.

¹⁰ Balázs, “A magánélet”, p. 168.

priate.¹¹ Kurtág never treats words formally, like Stravinsky, but penetrates into the “soul of the Russian tongue” and his music rests on the peculiarities of the language. However, Kurtág’s choice of setting Russian poems to music may also be interpreted differently. As Galieva puts it, it represents Kurtág’s apolitical attitude, which is akin to Achmatova’s approach: by choosing the language of the oppressive power he wants to set a good example and tell that one has to distinguish between the Soviet Union as a political power and the Soviet – in this case: Russian – culture, which is something valuable.¹²

The Hungarian musicologist István Balázs departed from the political nature of the choice of language, too. He emphasized that Kurtág kept himself consciously aloof from public life. There is no politics in his music, yet his works “are saturated with political content without being directly involved in politics”.¹³ First, his works represent Eastern-Europe’s message to the world, second they are written in the language of Lenin and the ‘Great October’, third they express the loneliness of a private individual (as in a socialist country people can only be free in private life), and fourth, Kurtág’s oeuvre can be compared to Luigi Nono’s music, but while Nono fights for the social breakthrough in a capitalist society, Kurtág is confronted with the reality of everyday socialism.

The reference to Luigi Nono is not surprising: the communist composer was well-known and backed officially in Hungary. Many Hungarian composers knew him personally. György Kurtág dedicated to him his cycle for chorus (*Omaggio a Luigi Nono*), because – as he remembered – the Italian composer had advised him to write choral music.¹⁴ This dedication is all the more startling as *Omaggio*, which is based on Russian poems, has no connection with Nono’s oeuvre. There is always something astonishing about Kurtág’s dedications. *Messages of the Late R. V. Troussova*, which must have been conceived as a representative chef d’oeuvre, was dedicated to the relatively unknown Hungarian composer György Kósa who completed his highly acclaimed *Todesfuge* to Paul Celan’s poem in 1976. Kurtág, who planned to compose a *Todesfuge* himself,¹⁵ was delighted with the old master’s piece and apart from the dedication he used the horn in the piece in much the same way as Kósa did in his cantata: as a crucial instrument that symbolizes the loneliness of the individual.

The other specialty of Kurtág’s dedication to Luigi Nono is that the movements of the piece are provided with separate dedications. For example, the fourth movement is dedicated to Sofia Gubaidulina. A similar dedication to Alfred Schnittke can be found in the *Scenes from a*

¹¹ Stephen Walsh, “Kurtág’s Russian Settings: The Word Made Flesh”, in: *Contemporary Music Review* 2–3 (2001): *Perspectives on Kurtág*, ed. by Rachel Beckles Willson and Allen Williams, p. 71–88, here p. 79. Dina Lentsner, “The Russian Kurtág; or How to Adopt a Language”, in: *Mitteilungen der Paul Sacher Stiftung* 20 (2007), p. 38–42, here p. 42. Galieva, “Dirges”, p. 281–282.

¹² Galieva, “Dirges”, p. 287.

¹³ Balázs, “A magánélet”, p. 165.

¹⁴ Varga, *Kurtág*, p. 105.

¹⁵ Friedrich Spangemacher, “Mit möglichst wenig Tönen möglichst viel sagen. Ein Gespräch mit dem Komponisten György Kurtág”, in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 124 (1998), p. 65.

Novel which, as a whole, was dedicated to the first performer of Kurtág's Russian compositions, the soprano Adrienne Csengery. The third of the *Achmatova Songs* was inspired by Edison Denisov's death in 1996. Kurtág later mentioned that his interest in Soviet avantgarde music was aroused by Denisov's *Lamentations* from 1966.¹⁶ Moreover, Kurtág wrote homages to Schnittke and Denisov in his series *Games*, too. Considering the fact that these Soviet composers were almost completely unknown in Hungary at that time, it is justified to ask where Kurtág gathered information about their music. What is more: his dedication to Gubaidulina – „Sonje Gubaidulinoi” – suggests a close, almost friendly relationship. The international reputation of the three composers – similar to Kurtág's career – started at the beginning of the 1980s.

Kurtág had naturally tried to get to the international music scene earlier, in the 1960s, but his endeavours proved to be a complete failure. His work *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* was absolutely neglected in Darmstadt in 1969.¹⁷ It is small wonder: Kurtág's vocal concerto stood strongly in the Hungarian tradition. The piece with a duration of more than 40 minutes written for soprano and piano to 16th-century Hungarian philosophical literature couldn't be understood in the Darmstadtian avantgarde context. The failure was a trauma for Kurtág: he was unable to compose for several years. Only the experimental nature of his *Games* helped him to get over the crisis and search for new ways, which led him in the end to his Russian compositions.

Kurtág took revenge for the lack of success in Darmstadt with his Troussova-cycle which was commissioned by Pierre Boulez and the Ensemble Intercontemporain. Kurtág, the “conscious strategist”, as Rachel Beckles Willson likes to call him,¹⁸ put on the clothes of a Soviet avantgarde composer, well aware of the fact that a Soviet avantgarde composer would excite more interest in the world than a Hungarian one. As Galieva-Szokolay puts it: “the musical realization of Russian material has become, over the years, an indispensable component of Kurtág's self-fashioning.”¹⁹ Nonetheless, by using the Hungarian cimbalom Kurtág also writes his own nationality into the compositions, though he doesn't use the instrument in the traditional manner.

Analysts of the Russian pieces interpret these compositions as parts of a homogeneous workgroup due to the choice of the language. However, the music and the content make it obvious that the group is by no means homogeneous. Even Rachel Beckles Willson emphasized that the late cycle *Songs of Despair and Sorrow* finished after 1989 was written in a completely different political context.²⁰ With this piece Kurtág erected a monument for the victims of communism focusing above all on the artists' role and responsibility in dictatorship, a subject-

¹⁶ Galieva, “Dirges”, p. 300.

¹⁷ For documentation see the book of Rachel Beckles Willson: *György Kurtág: The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza, Op. 7. A ‘Concerto’ for Soprano and Piano*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2003.

¹⁸ Rachel Beckles Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, p. 167.

¹⁹ Galieva, “Dirges”, p. 279.

²⁰ Beckles Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág*, p. 202.

matter he would not have spoken of openly before the political changes in 1989. This may be the reason why he was unable to finish his op. 18 at the time of his other Russian cycles.

But one can notice a difference even between the Trousova-cycle and the two other Russian pieces: *Scenes* and *Omaggio*. This difference throws light on how Kurtág imagined an ideal Soviet avantgarde composition and what kind of musical connotations he connected with the phenomenon “Russianness”. “Russianness” appeared in this context as a symbol for “otherness” as Galieva-Szokolay worded it referring to Richard Taruskin,²¹ but this “otherness” carries obnoxious features which are at the same time indisputably sincere. The appearance of this “otherness” is always linked to the moments of articulating truth.

Writing about the Trousova-cycle and *Omaggio* István Balázs emphasized that Kurtág tried to avoid the usual “intonation” layers of Soviet-Russian music and didn’t use Russian folk material either.²² The latter observation is, however, not adequate. There is a movement in the Trousova-cycle called *Chastushka* where even the title refers to Russian culture. At the same time it is worth mentioning that this movement is an exception in the whole cycle as the other parts of the composition are more abstract, they don’t play with historical styles or genres as *Chastushka* does. *Chastushka* is the last movement of the second part of the cycle. This second part with the title *A Little Erotic* plays the role of the scherzo in the cycle and is characterised by a kind of playfulness or colourful quality unknown in the rest of the composition. The first movement (*Heat*) presents the individual’s fire in love, the second (*Two interlaced bodies*) is a love scene, and the third – the only movement written for solo voice in the cycle – imitates the squealing of pigs (*Why should I not squeal like a pig...*). These three movements lead us to the trivial *Chastushka* that represents eroticism directly (Example 1). In the two last movements the heroine’s strength of character absolutely moulders: after having lost her instrumental accompaniment, that is her masks, the appearances of her life in the third movement, she begins to speak musically Russian, that is vulgarly but sincerely in the fourth.

Vulgarity or triviality as a means of composition appear frequently in Shostakovich’s music, for example in the *Four Poems of Captain Lebiadkin* that Kurtág called a “fascinating” composition or – to speak about “a little erotic” – in the *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. At that time Kurtág could naturally not be familiar with the original version of the opera with the love scene yet. The conscious use of trivial musical elements emerged relatively late in Kurtág’s oeuvre, around 1979 or 1980. It belonged to the latest compositional layer of *Trousova* (*Chastushka* was composed in June 1980²³) and was worked out to the greatest extent in the two other Russian cycles in which the composer employed them constantly. This triviality or – as a Hungarian

²¹ Galieva, “Dirges”, p. 282.

²² Balázs, “A magánélet”, p. 169.

²³ Claudia Stahl, *Botschaften in Fragmenten. Die grossen Vokalzyklen von György Kurtág*, Saarbrücken: Pfau 1998, p. 80–82.

Example 1: Kurtág, *Messages of the Late R. V. Troussova*, II/4, Chastushka, bars 1–3 (© EMB 1982)

analyst called it following one of Kurtág’s performing instructions – the “stile popolare” mode of writing²⁴ was connected partly with Russian dances and partly with waltzes.

Two waltzes form part of the *Scenes from a Novel*. The first is the first interlude of *Rondo*, the 7th movement (Example 2). In this movement the word “goworila” (I said) is repeated many times, and creates the effect of an endless, motoric round dance, that is a rondo. Under these circumstances the main parts represent the everlasting and constant circulation of life. Only the interludes put the listener off this timelessness: the first interlude, the waltz, recurring on the joint past of the lovers, creates the feeling of real time contrasted with the timelessness of the “goworila”-parts.

The reverse effect comes about in the 9th movement called *Hurdy-Gurdy Waltz* (Example 3). It is an homage to Alfred Schnittke who is known to have been very fond of the genre waltz, too. Kurtág’s hurdy-gurdy plays almost the same melody when repeated, but there are minor differences in the intervals used which produce a mistuned effect. In the accompaniment mainly the doublebass and the cimbalom play constantly the same chords. The heroine sings here about the “rush hours” of her “soul’s tramcar”, that is Kurtág links once again musical timelessness to a text referring to time. It means waltz and time are paired in Kurtág’s compositional concept.

²⁴ Márta Papp, “A keserűség és a csüggedés dalai. Kurtág György kórusciklusáról” [The Songs of Dispair and Sorrow. About György Kurtág’s Choir Cycle], in: *Muzsika* 3 (2001), p. 25–27, here p. 26.

Вальс (Valse)
quasi a tempo

Canto VI. Cb.

leggero, grazioso
+ arco pizz. arco + arco pizz. arco

p, leggiero

Example 2: Kurtág, *Scenes From a Novel*, 7. Valse (© EMB 1986)

Tempo di Walzer meccanico, molto irregolare

per la 1. volta Canto per la 2. volta

*fémverő **
mp p

mp p

И в пик - ча - сы И в пик - ча - сы

Example 3: Kurtág, *Scenes From a Novel*, 9. Tempo di Walzer

The same gesture can be seen in the 2nd movement of *Omaggio a Luigi Nono* based on some lines of a poem by Achmatova. It is about time again (weeks, months and years) and timelessness appears again. However, in the course of the short text Achmatova describes a radical change in the appearance and the soul of the lovers who must have been separated in the meantime: this change manifests itself in the gradual dispersion of the waltz-rhythm (Example 4).

Tempo di Walzer lento

S
He

A
He не-де-ли, ме-ся-цы

T
He не-де-ли, ме-ся-цы

B
He не-де-ли, ме-ся-цы

He

Example 4: Kurtág, *Omaggio a Luigi Nono*, 2. Tempo di Walzer (© EMB 1985)

Kurtág always put his Russian compositions into European context. It is obvious that whenever Kurtág uses the genre of waltz as a symbol of timelessness or time, he refers to the music of Gustav Mahler, one of the most important models of postmodern musical thinking. In the 5th movement of *Scenes from a Novel* Kurtág writes an homage to Mahler: in the middle part of this movement, *Counting-out Rhyme* Kurtág inserts a “kamarinskaya” referring in part to Glinka’s composition often played in Hungary in the 1950s (Example 5).

about the everlasting mutual dependence of lovers. The movement has the impression of a turba from Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion*, and the poem forming part of the cycle "The Messages of Apostle Paul to me" and written after Corinthians 16:9 has even a biblical reference. The reference to Bach can be linked to Gubaidulina as well who achieved her first international success with *Offertorium* based on the famous theme of Bach's *Musikalisches Opfer*.

This exception derives from the special concept of *Omaggio*. Kurtág lists here the possible musical forms of an imagined Soviet avantgarde composition referring to the Russian musical past and present (trivial dance, Gubaidulina, church choruses) as well as to Western experiments and tradition (Hommage a Tristan, counterpoint, aleatory). *Omaggio* can be interpreted as a study: it showed Kurtág the path he could follow after the deadlock in composing the Troussova-cycle. His experiments with *Omaggio* had a liberating effect on *Scenes from a Novel*. It helped the emergence of a new musical ideal built upon references to different styles, genres, allusions and citations. The imaginary Soviet avantgarde music allowed György Kurtág to become aware of his postmodern turn.