

ANALYTICAL APPROACHES TO GYÖRGY KURTÁG'S  
"THREE OLD INSCRIPTIONS FOR VOICE AND PIANO," Op. 25

by

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## Abstract

György Kurtág is one of the most influential composers alive today. His music conveys a strong sense of Hungarian culture, but draws influences from many composers and eras. His compositions range from miniature solo pieces to large orchestral compositions (*Stele*, Op. 33), and from the twelve-tone idiom (*String Quartet* No. 1, Op.1) to electroacoustic works (*Mémoire de Laïka*). His best-known pieces are mostly vocal works, which demonstrate a rare brilliance in utilizing music to heighten poetic content. *The Three Old Inscriptions*, Op. 25, for voice and piano, is a work that has not yet received close attention from music theorists.

Although more compact than some of his other vocal pieces, this work manifests many characteristic features of Kurtág's compositional approach and technique. It is an excellent example of how he incorporates traditional and past compositional elements in a contemporary idiom to develop a unique contemporary compositional style.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter one provides background on Kurtág's compositional style and influences, a brief introduction to *The Three Old Inscriptions*, and a synopsis of the three pieces. Chapter two contains a section-by-section musical analysis of the third movement. Chapter three discusses compositional techniques that are not treated in chapter two, and examines the relationship between the music and the text in the third movement. Collectively, chapters two and three also address the integration of elements from the past and present in Op. 25.

In the third movement, Kurtág employs many traditional idioms: the use of a cantus firmus and descant, the use of ostinato, folk and chant-like melody, prevalent intervals such as thirds and fifths, direct quotes from preceding composers, and the presence of tonal reference and closure. He also borrows compositional techniques from Bartók and Webern, such as wedge-like figures and the alternation between major and minor thirds. Kurtág's music demonstrates how he has evolved from traditional idioms when he invents his own notations and symbols, and brings new expressions in his use of symbolism, word painting, and musical rebuses.

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*To my family*



## Chapter 1 Introduction

György Kurtág was born in 1926 at Lugos, in Romania. From 1940 he took piano lessons from Magda Kardos and studied composition with Max Eisikovits. Moving to Budapest, he enrolled at the Academy of Music in 1946 where he studied composition, piano, and chamber music. In 1948, he became a Hungarian citizen. In 1957-58, Kurtág attended courses by Messiaen and Milhaud in Paris after which he returned to Budapest. From 1958-63, he worked as a répétiteur with the Béla Bartók Music Secondary School in Budapest. From 1960-80, he was répétiteur with soloists of the National Philharmonia. From 1967 he was an assistant to Pál Kadosa, his piano teacher, at the Academy of Music, and the following year he was appointed Professor of Chamber music. He held this post until 1986 and subsequently continued to teach at the Academy until 1993. After his retirement, he was frequently invited to give master classes, to teach, and to compose for various academies and orchestras internationally. Kurtág has received numerous awards including the 2006 Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition for his “...concertante...”.<sup>1</sup>

Kurtág has written music for many different genres and different instrumentations. His instrumental works include string quartets (*String Quartet*, Op.1), works for guitar and chamber orchestra (*Grabstein Für Stephan*, Op. 15), works for piano and groups of instruments (...*Quasi una Fantasia*..., Op. 27), large orchestral works (*Stele*, Op. 33),

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<sup>1</sup> “György Kurtág Biography,” Boosey and Hawkes online, [http://www.boosey.com/pages/cr/composer/composer\\_main.asp?composerid=2797&tttype=BIOGRAPHY&tttitle=Biography](http://www.boosey.com/pages/cr/composer/composer_main.asp?composerid=2797&tttype=BIOGRAPHY&tttitle=Biography) (accessed 20 July 2008).

piano chamber music such as a piano four hands piece (*Suite* for piano four hands), and electroacoustic music (*Mémoire de Laïka*). His vocal works include works for soprano and piano (*The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*, Op. 7), for soprano, violin, and cimbalom (*In Memory of a Winter Sunset*, Op. 8), for soprano and ensemble (*Messages of the late R.V. Troussouva*, Op. 17), and for orchestra and mixed choir (*Messages for Orchestra*, Op. 34). He is still in the process of completing many compositions which he had begun more than ten years ago.

Kurtág's music always contains traces of his origin or some relationship with his Hungarian nationality. He has written mostly for voice and small ensembles, including instruments such as the cimbalom, which is a musical instrument of Hungarian and Romanian Gypsies that may be tracked back in history to the Orient and the Middle East.

Kurtág has written in a range of idioms, using dodecaphonic technique in his early period and aleatoric elements in his later period. In his dodecaphonic pieces, usually the rows are not strictly followed, such as in his earlier work *String Quartet*, Op.1. His piece *Einige Satze aus den Sudelbuchern Georg Christoph Lichtenbergs*, Op. 37, is composed in an aleatoric manner.<sup>2</sup> The singer is free to choose the songs and the order in which to perform them. His vocal music often utilizes vivid word painting to accentuate the text and the music. In his *Pas à pas*, Op 36, he has inserted a few humorous responses to the text. For instance, in setting "The trouble with tragedy is the fuss it makes about life and death and other tuppenny aches," the word "fuss" is accompanied with a police whistle.

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret McLay, "Three Recent Works by György Kurtág: Aspects of Settings of Text by Lichtenberg, Hölderlin and Beckett," *The Hungarian Quarterly* 41:159 (Autumn 2000): 146.

In another case, the French word “pire” (meaning “worst”) is to be sung “glissando” and “with fluttered tongue.”<sup>3</sup> Examples of word painting in Op. 25 will be discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis.

Kurtág's approach to composition results from his manner of incorporating influences from music of the recent and distant past, and his characteristic ways of using recall and repetition in his work. It is these two principal elements that characterize his unique way of composition, as attested by Sylvia Grmela.<sup>4</sup> Kurtág's musical language contains layers of memories. Some of his music is written with references to the musical past, from the medieval to the present. His music always makes references to past composers or frequently his own work. Kurtág's methods of using recall and repetition can be separated into five different categories.<sup>5</sup>

The first category involves transcribing an entire movement, often in different instrumentations, from other composers or his own works. He often quotes from the works of composers such as J. S. Bach, Scarlatti, Schubert, and Stockhausen.<sup>6</sup> Kurtág acknowledges that he has been influenced by many composers ranging from medieval to contemporary such as Machaut, Palestrina, Bach, Schubert, Schumann, Bartók, and Webern. He likes to compose by imitating existing music. For example, his *Viola Concerto* is directly influenced by Bartók's Violin Concerto. Some of his works such as

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Grmela, “Recall and Repetition in Some Works by Kurtág,” *Studia Musicologica-Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43:3-4 (2002): 371.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 372-74.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 373.

*Rückblick*, even contain quotes from his own earlier compositions, extending a former work by presenting each phrase in the original order and elaborating on it. Kurtág “has said that when he writes a musical passage that he is happy with, he accepts it as a gift, incorporates it into his language as one of his musical objects, and feels free to distribute it throughout his works.”<sup>7</sup>

The second category of recall and repetition consists of borrowing a motive or a musical gesture from a composer as homage, dedication, or in memoriam. That gives us an idea that the style of the music might be similar, though usually not very explicitly so, to the other composer’s works. For example, *Játékok* comprises a collection of piano pieces which are written in homage to composers such as Machaut, Scarlatti, Schumann, and Stravinsky.

The third category consists of using a previously written movement as the basis of a new movement. This is found in the last movement of *quasi una fantasia*, Op. 27 where each phrase of the fifth movement of *Twelve Microludes for String Quartet*, Op. 13, is presented and elaborated on in turn.

The fourth category reworks similar compositional problems from an earlier work in a later one, such as in *Játékok*, in which several movements are entitled “Playing with

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 372.

overtones” and each movement addresses the ”problem” described in the title in its own way.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the fifth category utilizes another composer’s characteristic compositional technique or instrumentation. This is found in Kurtág’s *String Quartet*, Op. 28 where four of the movements use certain aspects of Webern’s *String Quartet*, also Op. 28, as their starting points.

Kurtág’s works, especially his early works, are mostly influenced by Bartók and Webern. “My mother tongue is Bartók” is a well known declaration by Kurtág.<sup>9</sup> From Bartók, he borrowed the idea of repeating a melodic motif to build traditional phrases and formal structures, the use of wedge-like figures, ostinato, folk-tune elements, and the alternation of major and minor thirds and of major and minor chords.

From Webern, Kurtág learned to build his works by using very small motives or ideas. Kurtág tends to constantly alter small motives and slowly turn them into shapes that cannot be easily related to their original forms. The presence of other compositional aspects found in many of Kurtág’s pieces also manifest this relationship; for instance, Webern’s tendency to “present notes with different durations within a very short time-span, and also to make frequent changes of tempo, gives an impression of irregularity,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 374.

<sup>9</sup> Simone Hohmaier, “Mutual Roots of Musical Thinking: György Kurtág, Péter Eötvös and their Relation to Ernő Lendvai’s Theories,” *Studia Musicologica-Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43:3-4 (2002): 223.

almost randomness, which is far removed from traditional rhythmic patterns.”<sup>10</sup> In most of Webern’s music, it is still possible to feel a sense of meter since the changes of tempo are not very frequent. But Kurtág’s music progresses one step further than Webern.<sup>11</sup>

According to Margaret McLay, the constant change of note durations sets up a sense of randomness in Kurtág’s music.<sup>12</sup> Kurtág’s chief technique consists of presenting a great deal of musical information in a very short space of time, which results in difficulty for the audience to take in all the information at once. An example is found in the second movement of Op. 25. In addition, listeners cannot form a clear sense of meter, or find it very difficult to identify the meter because of the frequent metric changes, varied durations and rhythms, and the irregularity of rhythmic accents in a dense texture.

Even though Bartók had occasionally used wedge-like figures in his music, Kurtág mainly borrowed the idea from Webern, who often uses inversions, symmetries, and gradually extends outwards in a chromatic format. In his earlier pieces, Kurtág has also used some serial techniques such as transposition of a basic row and its inversions and retrogrades. In those early works, he often presents a complete row at the beginning of a piece, and will thereafter use row segments, rather than complete rows. In his later pieces, Kurtág is interested in working with completing aggregates, or expanding small motives, rather than twelve-tone serial techniques. Kurtág has also adapted the idea of composing

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<sup>10</sup> Margaret Purcell McLay, “The music of György Kurtág 1959-1980,” Ph.D. diss., University of Liverpool, 1986: 14.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 16.

miniature pieces from Webern. How these influences and styles relate to *The Three Old Inscriptions*, Op. 25 will be further discussed in this thesis.

### ***The Three Old Inscriptions, Op. 25***

Kurtág's vocal music is of greatest interest among all his different genres because the text and music are often so closely related. His compositional techniques often accentuate the text quite adeptly, helping the music and text to unite as a whole. The *Three Old Inscriptions Op. 25*, written in 1987, is a miniature three-movement piece written for voice and piano, using German and Hungarian folk texts. This piece has not yet received much attention from music theorists, unlike other vocal pieces such as Op. 7, 17, and 24. Op. 25 deserves more attention because it demonstrates Kurtág's compositional technique and approach to vocal music, and contains many traces of influence from Webern and Bartók. Op. 25 is a piece which integrates traditional and modern compositional techniques and is considered to be one of his middle-period compositions.

This piece conveys a very strong Hungarian nationalistic sense. Although the three movements in this miniature piece exemplify some different styles in Kurtág's music, the words and the content manifest close relationships because they are connected to Hungary and are centered on the theme of death. The texts for the three movements are respectively from a medieval German script, from a carved inscription from a late eighteenth-century Transylvanian Székely mangle<sup>13</sup>, and from the 1939 epitaph of a

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<sup>13</sup> A "mangle" is a machine for squeezing water from and pressing linen and clothing. While more modern ones consist of two or more cylinders revolving against each other within a frame, either free-standing or attached to a washing machine, in earlier centuries they involved an oblong rectangular wooden

young German woman in a Hungarian village cemetery. More detailed discussions of the textual content and compositional treatment will be presented in the following chapters.

The first movement, entitled “Flower,” is marked *poco vivace*, but the proliferation of long note values has the effect of a slow movement. The text is from the fifteenth century, by János Gugelweit, a clerk in the town of Sopron, a place with more than a thousand years of history and one of the most important places of Hungarian gastronomy. It is situated in the Northwest part of Transdanubia, between Fertő Lake and Sopron Mountain, along the bank of Ikva brook, which today forms the border between Austria and Hungary. The poem was found in the 1930’s and published in 1939 by Jenő Házi, an employee of the Sopron Archives. According to Jenő Házi, János Gugelweit was the town notary, and wrote this song at the beginning of 1490. Házi argues that the Hungarian literary history of this song makes it the oldest memoir of Hungarian secular poetry.<sup>14</sup> Kurtág selected the last 2 lines of the poem for this setting. The poem is about a deceased woman, described as a flower, whom the narrator must leave and mourn for. Kurtág has also set other texts about flowers, especially the text “Flowers we are, Frail Flowers” first used in *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza*, Op.7, and later reset three times in his String Quartet, op. 28.<sup>15</sup>

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chest filled with stones, resting on two cylinders, which were thus rolled with great pressure over the fabric spread upon a polished table. See “Mangle,” Oxford English Dictionary Online, [http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00301085?query\\_type=word&queryword=mangle&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&sort\\_type=alpha&result\\_place=3&search\\_id=oJGD-LIslyd-8269&hilite=00301085](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00301085?query_type=word&queryword=mangle&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=3&search_id=oJGD-LIslyd-8269&hilite=00301085) (accessed January 2009).

<sup>14</sup> “fotóalbum,” Soproni Levéltár Homepage, [http://www.levehtar.sopron.hu/nemet/seta\\_n/i\\_vir\\_en\\_n\\_fr.htm](http://www.levehtar.sopron.hu/nemet/seta_n/i_vir_en_n_fr.htm) (accessed 16 August 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Grmela, “Recall and Repetition in Some Works by Kurtág,” 372.



The second movement, entitled “Transylvanian Székely Mangle 1792” is marked *molto agitato*. It is the fastest, busiest, and loudest of the set of three. Kurtág’s parents were born in Transylvania, Romania.<sup>16</sup> Transylvania was part of Hungary for more than a thousand years.<sup>17</sup> After World War I, it became part of Romania. Since medieval times, the population of the region has been a mixture of many peoples: ethnic Romanians, the majority of the population, historically known as Vlachs; ethnic Hungarians, including their largest group unique to the region, the Székely; ethnic Germans known as Saxons; Armenians; Jews; and Roma known as gypsies. The Székely were considered the finest warriors of medieval Transylvania. They used to belong to Hungary and later to Romania.<sup>18</sup> Few people declare their ethnicity as “Székely” today since they were only allowed to choose one identity as either “Székely” or “Hungarian” after WW1, and most people chose the latter.

The text is narrated by a peasant named Gábor Móre, who is imprisoned for killing Lieutenant Görgényi because his beloved, Anna Cserei, gave the Lieutenant her maidenhood. The text was carved on the mangle. In order to suit the mood and content of the text, Kurtág has set it to a fast tempo with loud dynamics and many leaping gestures to express anger and passion. This movement is dedicated, in memoriam, to the famous Hungarian painter and graphic artist Endre Bálint (1914-1986). Kurtág has also dedicated to this painter another miniature instrumental piece, “Hommage a Endre Bálint,” in his set of pieces *Játékok*.

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<sup>16</sup> “Encyclopedia, György Kurtág,” NationMaster, <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Gy%C3%B6rgy-Kurt%C3%A1g> (accessed 30 January 2008).

<sup>17</sup> McLay, “Three Recent Works by György Kurtág,” 146.

<sup>18</sup> “Transylvania,” Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transylvania> (accessed 30 January 2008).

The third movement, entitled “On a Cross in the cemetery at Mecseknádasd” is marked *calmo, sostenuto*, and moves at a steady andante speed. The text is from a cross in the Cemetery at Mecseknádasd, and is also the epilogue to the poem “Soulbird” by Ilona Bakó. Mecseknádasd is a village in Baranya, Hungary, known for its medieval heritage. The content of the inscription is more modern, and is about a young German woman (age 29) who passed away suddenly due to a fever in March 1939, shortly before the outbreak of WWII.

This thesis will focus analytically on the third movement, which is of academic interest because of the three pieces in Op. 25 it includes and integrates the greatest variety of compositional techniques and past influences. In Chapter Two, the musical analysis and the compositional technique will be addressed section-by-section. The aspects that have not been discussed and the relationship between the music and the text will be examined in Chapter Three.

## Chapter 2—Analytical Approaches to the Third

### Movement

This chapter offers a musical analysis of the third movement. The analysis is divided into sections based on the text divisions and the musical textures. The chapter examines each section as well as how the sections are related to each other. In each section, the characteristics of the constituent contrapuntal lines such as specific intervals, contours, and melodic motives are discussed in detail. This chapter also studies how the different contrapuntal lines work together and against each other, creating consonant and dissonant harmonies. Kurtág's compositional use of ostinatos, wedge-like figures, prevalent intervals (e.g. seconds, thirds, and fifths), aggregates, and characteristic pitch class sets will be discussed accordingly.

The third movement is entitled *On a Cross in the Cemetery at Mecseknádasd*, and subtitled *An epilogue to Ilona Bakó's "Soulbird."* It is written for soprano voice with piano accompaniment that consists of three distinct contrapuntal parts. The text is taken from an inscription written in German on a tombstone in a Hungarian cemetery. The musical treatment suggests a division into four consecutive sections which I will label A1, B, C, and A2. These divisions reflect clear differences in musical texture, compositional technique, and content in each text section. Figure 1 gives the different sections of the text in boxes, and adds line numbers (a1, a2, etc.). In the same layout, Figure 2 provides the English translation by Peter Sherwood provided with the music score. The layouts of both figures are the same.

**Figure 1: The Original Text in German**

Section A1	Text
a1	Hier ruhet in Gott
a2	Theresia Hengl,
a3	Gestorben am 27 März 1939 (Gestorben am sieben-und-zwanzigsten März Neunzehnhundertneununddreißig)
a4	Im Alter von 29 Jahren. (Im Alter von neunundzwanzig Jahren)
Section B	
b1	In der schönsten Blüte meines jungen Lebens
b2	Zehrte mich das Fieber auf.
b3	Drum muss ich noch im Lenze
b4	ins kühle Grab hinaus.
b5	‘S ist Gott dein Wille
b6	und ich bin stille.
Section C	
c1	Das war ihr letztes Schreiben.
Section A2	
a5	Ruhe sanft in Frieden.

**Source:** *Three Old Inscriptions for voice and piano Op. 25*. Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest editions: 2.

**Figure 2: Translation of the Poem in English**

Section A1	Text
a1	Here rests in God
a2	Theresia Hengl,
a3	died the 27th of March 1939
a4	at the age of 29.
Section B	
b1	In the veriest bloom of my young life
b2	the fever devoured me,
b3	so I must depart this life in my prime,
b4	out into the cold of the grave.
b5	It is, God, your will,
b6	and I am still.
Section C	
c1	These were her last words.
Section A2	
a5	Rest gently in peace.

**Source:** *Three Old Inscriptions for voice and piano Op. 25*. Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest editions: 4.

The text of the A1 section corresponds to the basic traditional element on the tombstone, the real inscription, identifying the name and date of death of the deceased woman. The A2 section, at the end of the text, conveys the blessing on the tombstone. Kurtág gives these two sections of the text similar musical textures, in which the soprano vocal line is supported by three contrapuntal parts in the piano. (The soprano is often, but not always, the highest part in the texture.) The three contrapuntal voices in the piano are presented

by two voices in the right hand, one in the left. The top voice of the piano right hand will be referred to as the “Descant”; it is written in open note heads moving melodically mostly in thirds and sixths. The lower right-hand voice will be termed the “Cantus Firmus”; written in solid note heads, it involves a repeating line that descends chromatically from G4 to C4. The reasons for using these terms will be discussed shortly. The left-hand piano part ranges from C#1 up to F#5, but stays below C4 in the A1, C, and A2 sections. It moves in solid and open note values, is mostly melodic and often moves in contrary motion against the other parts, and with more melodic and rhythmic freedom and variety than the other parts; it sometimes has two-note or three-note simultaneities, generally above C4, and only in the B section.

The B section of the text, a quote from the woman herself, describes how she died. This section uses a different musical texture and voice distribution. The music is in a folk-like diatonic idiom (marked “*Volksliedartig—einfach und belebt, gemächlich im Tempo*” meaning in a folk-like manner, simple and lively in tempo.). The right hand has a {G4, D5} perfect fifth drone throughout this section; the bass starts with a melodic line, but towards the second half of the section, the bass forms chords mostly based on fifths.

The C section of the text is presented in the voice of a third person, or a narrator, and it identifies the B section text as the last written statement of the deceased woman. The musical setting is very short and only spans two measures. The voice sings a short melody that ascends from C4 to G4 and descends back to C4, and it thus operates within the same ambitus used by the Cantus Firmus voice in the A1 and A2 sections. The

melodic character of this short vocal line is reminiscent of plainchant, but the intervallic progressions are not diatonic, but instead mostly within a single whole-tone collection. The piano answers with two dissonant trichords, more or less as a wordless “A-men.” The C section acts as a transition between the B section and the short A2 section which recapitulates characteristic features of the A1 section.

### **Kurtág’s Use of Notations and Signs**

Before a further analysis of the third movement, Kurtág’s use of notations and signs has to be addressed first. As with many of his pieces, Kurtág does not employ either time signature or key signature for the third movement of Op. 25. The measures do not represent meter, and the note heads do not represent strict note values but only the relative durations. Kurtág has invented his own symbols to represent different note lengths. The chart in Figure 3 exhibits the signs and symbols that he utilizes. In the third movement, the breves employed are treated approximately as whole notes, the whole notes are treated approximately as half notes, and the filled note heads are treated as quarter notes. Kurtág also uses two types of fermata signs to represent different rests lengths: a fermata sign without a dot represents a long rest, and an upside down fermata without a dot represents a shorter rest.<sup>19</sup> In Kurtág’s vocal works, the *quasi-parlato* lozenge-shaped note-head denotes the free distribution of several syllables on one single tone. It indicates a “senza colore” performance style rather than any imprecision in

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<sup>19</sup> McLay, “The music of György Kurtág 1959-1980,” 144.

pitch.<sup>20</sup> Examples of the *quasi parlato* are found in mm. 6 and 8 of the third movement where the voice sings in a recitative manner.

**Figure 3: Signs and Symbols Often Used by Kurtág**

### KEY TO THE SIGNS USED





Signs affecting the duration (over notes or rests):

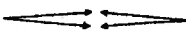
-  = long prolongation
-  = prolongation
-  = shortening


The range of sound values, in decreasing order:




Signs indicating rests:

-  = very long (fermata)
-  = long
-  = short
-  = rest of caesura value.

 = slight tempo modifications with crescendo and diminuendo (move ahead or hold back in the direction indicated by the arrow).

 = only one of these two notes should be chosen.

 = quasi parlato; free distribution of several syllables on one single tone.

**Source:** *Seven Songs for voice and cimbalom Op. 22*. Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest editions: 17.

## Sections A1 and A2

This piece starts in a calm, sustained, and slow tempo to help depict the sorrowful atmosphere. The movement opens with a two-measure prelude before the A1 text begins, and it closes with a one-and-a-half-measure postlude after the A2 text finishes. The prelude and postlude belong with their respective A sections because they contain similar musical content, as can be seen in Figure 4, which shows the first four measures of the

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 139-40.



movement. The Cantus Firmus and Descant together present their basic materials in m. 1. They present a shorter variant in m. 2, with the added bass line, which imitates the first two pitches of the m. 1 Descant in contrary motion to the Cantus Firmus. Mm. 3 and 4 each present new variants of the three-voice accompaniment material, now supporting the soprano singer. The soprano sometimes coincides with pitches in the Descant or Cantus Firmus, but each part is a distinct melodic and rhythmic entity. In the succession of resulting harmonies, diatonic chords are formed occasionally.

Figure 4: The First Four Measures of the Op. 25 Third Movement

Calmo, sostenuto

pp

perdendosi

Hier ru - het in Gott

The - re - si - a Hengl. (Hen -

Source: *Three Old Inscriptions for voice and piano Op. 25*. Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest editions:14.

The Cantus Firmus and Descant are always paired. Their given names correspond to similarities with older idioms of religious music. The Cantus Firmus is written in solid notes, with two slurred successive notes for every open note in the slower-moving

Descant (which also moves mostly in slurred note pairs). Traditionally, the cantus firmus often moves in longer note values and a descant occurs as a faster part. Here we call the faster part the Cantus Firmus because it shows the monumental and repeating character of a passacaglia theme, which consists normally of a set of ground-bass or ostinato variations, usually of serious character. The repeated pattern remains unchanged and is usually in the bass serving as a harmonic anchor, while the upper lines vary freely. Here the passacaglia idea is set in the alto register, but it still functions as a repeating point of reference for the other voices. The label “cantus firmus” thus captures several aspects of its character and function.

### **Characteristics of the Cantus Firmus Part**

In both A sections, the Cantus Firmus is a descending chromatic scale moving from G4 to C4, comprising four slurred semitone dyads, <G4, F#4>, <F4, E4>, <Eb4, D4>, and <Db4, C4>. It acts as a repeating ostinato lament figure, with each chromatic descent spanning a measure. The repeating chromatic descent to C4 helps to emphasize C4 as one of the points of tonal reference in the A sections, as will be discussed in the next chapter in more detail. The Descant also mostly presents slurred two-note ideas, usually formed by either ascending or descending thirds or sixths. The bass does not have any specific pattern and is a mixture of open and solid notes. The voice is also written utilizing a mixture of open and solid notes. Most of the time, it forms a consonance or unison with either the cantus firmus or the Descant.

Alan E. Williams points out that Kurtág frequently uses descending chromatic figures in his later works, and claims that such figures are emblematic of the post-Webern generation, as is suggested in Ligeti's report to the Swedish Academy.<sup>21</sup> Although Kurtág uses descending chromatic figures more prominently in his later works, he also utilizes them as principal material in some of his earlier pieces, such as Op. 3.<sup>22</sup> In the third piece of Op. 25, the descending chromatic figure functions as a contrapuntal ostinato for the A sections. The pattern mainly appears in its full form but, in two cases, the figure is truncated and the last two notes <Db4, C4> are left out (see mm. 2 and 32 in the prelude and postlude respectively). In some cases, the notes appear with enharmonic spellings, e.g. Eb in m. 1, and D# in m.2. The spelling changes imply that Kurtág wants the majority of simultaneous intervals between the Cantus Firmus and the Descant to be spelled as thirds and sixths rather than augmented seconds, diminished seventh, etc.

The descending chromatic line of the Cantus Firmus, as a lament figure, symbolizes the death of the deceased woman. One of Kurtág's most prevalent compositional elements, the interval of the perfect fifth, is also outlined by the descending chromatic movement from G4 to C4. Williams has observed how the open perfect fifth has been associated with death since the early romantic period because it conveys a feeling of space and a sense of hollowness.<sup>23</sup> Here the combination of the descending chromatic motion and the perfect fifth ambitus creates a very strong symbol of death.

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<sup>21</sup> E. Alan, Williams, "Kurtág, Modernity, Modernisms," *Contemporary Music Review* 20 (2001): 57.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>23</sup> E. Alan, Williams, "György Kurtág and the Open Work," *The Hungarian Quarterly* 42: 163 (Autumn 2001): 144.

In order to avoid making any assumptions about the exact durations or pseudo-metric character of the Cantus Firmus and Descant note values, and to generally avoid terms such as “beat” which imply metric sensations that may not be idiomatic in this instance, the Cantus Firmus and Descant notes will simply be identified by their order position in the measure. “CF1,” “CF2,” etc. up to “CF8” will indicate the Cantus Firmus notes in each measure. (CF1 is always G4, CF2 is always F#4, etc.) The Descant notes move at a slower pace, each one corresponding to two CF notes. “D1-2” will indicate the Descant note corresponding with CF1 and CF2, “D3-4” will indicate the Descant note corresponding with CF3 and CF4, and so forth. Figure 5 displays the relationships between the text lines (column 1), using a1, and a2 to indicate the line numbers; and the Cantus Firmus (column 3), using numbers and abbreviations to indicate the measures and how the text aligns with the Cantus Firmus notes. For example, text line a1 starts on CF2 in m. 3 and ends on CF8, still in m. 3, so the Text Alignment column displays the measure number (in this case m.3) and the CF positions (in this case from CF2 to CF8) by writing 3.2-3.8. Column 2 displays the text itself and column 4 demonstrates the duration of text measured in the number of CF notes. Figure 5 shows that the Cantus Firmus statement and text lines usually do not start or end together, and that the alignment of text lines with the Cantus Firmus is constantly shifting. Measure 30 is the only place where the voice and Cantus Firmus start simultaneously. The fact that the voice and Cantus Firmus usually do not start and end together might be symbolic of the deceased woman’s early death at the age of twenty-nine or of a distinction between the physical and spiritual temporalities of human experience.

**Figure 5: The Relationship between the Text and the Cantus Firmus**

Line	Text	Text Alignment	Duration of text line measured in the number of CF notes
a1	Hier ruhet in Gott	3.2-3.8	7 CF notes
a2	Theresia Hengl,	4.2-5.4	11 CF notes
a3	Gestorben am 27 März 1939 (Gestorben am sieben und zwanzigsten März Neunzehnhundertneun und drei ßig)	5.6-7.8	11 CF notes, 7 unaccompanied syllables in m.6
a4	Im Alter von 29 Jahren. (Im Alter von neun und zwanzig Jahren)	8.2-9.4	7 CF notes plus 2 slow unaccompanied syllables in m.9. There is no CF in m.9, but the soprano note values would correspond with CF4
a5	Ruhe sanft in Frieden.	30.1-31.2	10 CF notes

## Characteristics of the Descant Part

The Descant is presented in the top part of the piano right hand, and is paired with the Cantus Firmus from the beginning. It is set in a one-against-two rhythmic pattern with the Cantus Firmus, which consists of two notes for every Descant note. The Descant part usually has 4-note figures, against the 8-note figures in the Cantus Firmus. The last Descant figure in section A1 has five notes instead of four (m. 8 shown in Figure 6a), with the last two notes being solid note heads that occur on a one-to-one basis with the Cantus Firmus. Figure 6a also shows how the four-note Descant figures are variants of one another. Only the third and seventh figures (mm.3 and 7) are identical because m. 7 acts as a return before the end of the A1 section by moving back to the original tempo

and recapitulating the beginning materials after the voice recitative in m. 6. Avoidance of repeated structural ideas, of regularity of forms, and of exact repetition, are common features of Kurtág's music.<sup>24</sup> Some features are always being varied. Figure 6a shows that every Descant figure in both A sections has the same melodic contour (ascending, descending, and ascending), but the intervals vary. The first note is always either Bb or B; the second note is usually Db or D, but Eb occurs once; the third note is usually F# or G, but Ab, A, and C occur once each; the last note is usually Ab or A, but F and Bb occur once each. The pitch variation generally increases as we move through the Descant: D1-2 has two variants, D3-4 has three, D5-6 has five variants, and D7-8 has four.

**Figure 6a: Melodic Intervals of the Descant Melody in the A Sections**

Measure	Descant Pitches D1-2	D3-4	D5-6	D7-8
1	Bb	Db	G	Bb
2	B	D	F#	
3	Bb	D	F#	A
4	B	Db	Ab	A
5	Bb	Eb	C	Ab
7	Bb	D	F#	A
8	B	Db	A	F-Ab
29	Bb	Db	Gb	A
30	B	D	G	A
31	B	Db	F#	G#
32	Bb	D	F#	

Simone Hohmaier states "Kurtág comes back to Bartók again and again."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, for Williams, Kurtág's frequent use of thirds, and sixths strongly recalls the major-minor

<sup>24</sup> McLay, "The music of György Kurtág 1959-1980," 131.

<sup>25</sup> Simone Hohmaier, "Analysis—Play—Composition: Remarks on the Creative Process of György Kurtág," *Contemporary Music Review* 20 (2001): 40.

arpeggios in Bartók's earlier piano pieces.<sup>26</sup> Although Kurtág's music is predominantly chromatic, consonant intervals sometimes play a striking role. Hohmaier mentions that minor thirds play a central structural role in Kurtág's piece *Lendvai Ernő in memoriam*.<sup>27</sup> In the third movement of the *The Three Old Inscriptions*, Figure 6b demonstrates all the melodic intervals formed in the Descant.

**Figure 6b: Melodic Intervals of the Descant Melody and the Formations of Triads**

M.	Pitches	Intervals	Triad subsets
1	<Bb4, Db5, G4, Bb4>	<m3, d5, m3>	Diminished
2	<B4, D5, F#4>	<m3, m6>	Minor
3	<Bb4, D5, F#4, A4>	<M3, m6, m3>	Major, augmented
4	<B4, Db5, Ab4, A4>	<d3, P4, m2>	
5	<Bb4, Eb5, C5, Ab4>	<P4, m3, M3>	Major
7	<Bb4, D5, F#4, A4>	<M3, m6, m3>	Major, augmented
8	<B4, Db5, A4, F4, Ab4>	<d3, d4, M3, m3>	Augmented
29	<Bb4, Db5, Gb4, A4>	<m3, P5, A2>	Major, minor
30	<B4, D5, G4, A4>	<m3, P5, M2>	Major
31	<B4, Db5, F#4, G#4>	<d3, d6, M2>	
32	<Bb4, D5, F#3>	<M3, m6>	Augmented

In section A1, the Descant mainly moves melodically by thirds and sixths, and occasionally by augmented seconds, perfect fourths and fifths. In each of the first three measures, except in m. 2 where the last set of notes D7-8, CF7, and CF8 are omitted, the Descant outlines a melodic pattern of an ascending third, then a descending tritone or minor sixth, followed by an ascending minor third: m. 1, <Bb4, Db5, G4, Bb4> = <+3, -6, +3>; m.2, <B4, D5, F#4> = <+3, -8>; and m. 3, <Bb4, D5, F#4, A4> = <+4, -8, +3>.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, "Kurtág, Modernity, Modernisms," 55.

<sup>27</sup> Simone Hohmaier, "Mutual Roots of Musical Thinking: György Kurtág, Péter Eötvös and their Relation to Ernő Lendvai's Theories," *Studia Musicologica-Academicae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43:3-4 (2002): 232.

In m. 4, the contour remains the same but the intervals become smaller and the melodic pattern changes to an ascending diminished third, then a descending perfect fourth, followed by an ascending minor second:  $\langle B4, Db5, Ab4, A4 \rangle = \langle +2, -5, +1 \rangle$ . In m. 5, the contour and interval sizes change more substantially: traversing an ascending perfect fourth, then a descending minor third, followed by a descending major third:  $\langle Bb4, Eb5, C5, Ab4 \rangle = \langle +5, -3, -4 \rangle$ . The Descant and Cantus Firmus are silent in m. 6. The Descant melodic pattern of m. 7 is identical to m. 3 (as is the Cantus Firmus). Measure 8,  $\langle B4, Db5, A4, F4, Ab4 \rangle$ , is a close variant of m. 4,  $\langle B4, Db5, Ab4, A4 \rangle$ . They both start with the same two pitches, and both use Ab4 and A4 later, but m. 8 has these two notes in opposite order, and inserts the extra pitch F4 as one of the faster extra notes at the end of the Descant.

In section A2, the Descant melodic pattern's contour remains the same except for the last measure. The interval pattern changes to mostly moving melodically by seconds, thirds, and fifths. The pattern in m. 29 is similar to that in m. 1 because they contain the same starting and ending intervals. In m. 29, the intervals move by an ascending minor third, followed by a descending perfect fifth, and an augmented second:  $\langle Bb4, Db5, Gb4, A4 \rangle = \langle +3, -7, +3 \rangle$ . In m. 30, the melodic pattern changes to an ascending minor third, preceding a descending perfect fifth which is followed by a major second:  $\langle B4, D5, G4, A4 \rangle = \langle +3, -7, +2 \rangle$ . In m. 31, the interval sizes change more substantially; an ascending diminished third is followed by a descending diminished sixth and then an ascending major second:  $\langle B4, Db5, F\#4, G\#5 \rangle = \langle +2, -7, +2 \rangle$ . Because the Descant notes in the last measure are identical to the first three notes in m. 3, these two measures share the



same melodic pattern: an ascending major 3rd followed by a descending minor 6th:

<Bb4, D5, F#4> = <+4, -8>.

Kurtág occasionally uses interval sequences in some of his compositions, and those from the *Wind Quintet*, Op. 2, have been described by Stephen Blum.<sup>28</sup> In Op. 2, the melodic interval sequence <4, 4, 3>, is repeated twelve times, moving through a complete cycle consecutively. For example, the first pattern, <Eb, G, B, D>, continues to the next pattern <D, F#, Bb, Db>, and so forth. Kurtág does not use a repeated interval pattern in the third movement of Op. 25, but he does maintain a similar melodic contour throughout the two sections, and slowly varies the melodic pattern away from its original. The pattern evolves from a more frequent use of thirds and sixths in section A1 to a more frequent use of seconds and fifths in section A2.

In both A sections, larger-scale semitone motions are formed by the first Descant notes of each measure (either Bb or B) which are almost always used in alternation. The Bb4 and B4 are always composed over the G4 in the Cantus Firmus. These particular major and minor thirds are heard as powerful points of reference in the pitch structure of the piece; they reinforce the importance of G4 in other sections of the movement (to be discussed later), and they complement the referential focus noted earlier, on C4 at the end of each Cantus Firmus statement. The melodic thirds in the Descant part also create a mixture of diminished, major, minor, and augmented triadic subsets, which are indicated in the last

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen Blum, "Kurtág's Articulation of Kafka's Rhythms ("Kafka-Fragmente," op. 24)," *Studia Musicologica-Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43:3-4 (2002): 353.

column of Figure 6b. These triads do not emphasize any points of reference in the pitch structure because they are built on different notes and do not form any regular patterns.

## Descant versus Cantus Firmus

The music moves in patterns of open and solid notes, but it would be incorrect to assume that it should be played in a regular meter; hence the discussion avoids terms like “beat.” In this discussion, we use the term “thetic” for the Cantus Firmus solid note that has the same attack as the Descant open note, i.e. the coincidence of D1-2 and CF1 is termed “thetic.” The Cantus Firmus note that enters while a Descant note is sustained is termed “non-thetic,” i.e. the coincidence of D1-2 and CF2 is termed “non-thetic.” To clarify this idea, note that Figure 7 demonstrates the first two measures of the music, with the “T” for “thetic” and “N” for “non-thetic.”

**Figure 7: The “Thetic” and “Non-thetic” Intervals Shown on the First Two Measures of the Third Movement**



**Source:** *Three Old Inscriptions for voice and piano Op. 25*. Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest editions:14.

Figure 8 shows the harmonic intervals formed between the Cantus Firmus and Descant in each measure or phrase. The middle column is separated into two rows. The top row

shows the intervals formed between the Descant and Cantus Firmus, and the bottom row illustrates whether the harmonic intervals are perfect consonances (“P”), imperfect consonances (“I”), or dissonances (“D”). The intervals in the top row are separated by commas to indicate the pairings of the thetic and non-thetic notes; a comma is placed before each new coincidence. The indications of perfect consonance, imperfect consonance, and dissonance are separated by commas in the same manner. By a significant margin, imperfect consonances are used most often. In section A1, there are thirty-six imperfect consonances, five perfect consonances, and nine dissonances. Notably, in section A2, there are twenty-four imperfect consonances, four perfect consonances, and two dissonances. The two A sections always start and end with imperfect consonances except for the first measure which ends with a non-thetic (D7-8 and CF8) dissonance but is preceded by a thetic (D7-8 and CF7) consonance.

**Figure 8: The Melodic and Harmonic Intervals between the Cantus Firmus and the Descant in Sections A1 and A2**

	Section A1	
Measure	Phrasing (with all the intervals formed between CF and Descant)	Thetic intervals (harmonic) formed by CF and Descant
1	<34, 89, 45, 9t>	m3, m6, M3, M6
	II, II, IP, ID	
2	<45, 9t, 34>	M3, M6, M3
	IP, ID, II	
3	<34, 9t, 34, 89>	m3, M6, m3, m6
	II, ID, II, II	
4	<45, 89, 56, 89>	M3, m6, P4, m6
	IP, II, PD, II	
5	<34, te, 9t, 78>	m3, m7, M6, P5
	II, DD, ID, PI	
6	/	
7	<34, 9t, 34, 89>	m3, M6, m3, m6
	II, ID, II, II	
8	<45, 89, 67, 48>	M3, m6, tt, m3
	IP, II, DP, II	
	Section A2	
29	<34, 89, 34, 89>	m3, m6, m3, m6
	II, II, II, II	
30	<45, 9t, 45, 89>	M3, M6, M3, m6
	IP, ID, IP, II	
31	<45, 89, 34, 78>	M3, m6, m3, P5
	IP, II, II, PI	
32	<34, 9t, 34>	m3, M6, m3
	II, ID, II	

The third column on Figure 8 lists only the thetic intervals. It also uses tonal interval names, to draw attention to the preponderance of imperfect consonances, especially minor thirds, and to suggest how the interaction of Descant and Cantus Firmus sounds as much like a reference to chromatic tonal idioms, as to atonal ones. Only two of the thetic intervals are dissonant (a minor seventh in m. 5 and a tritone in m. 8). Three are perfect consonances (a perfect fourth in m. 4, a perfect fifth in m. 5, and a perfect fifth in m. 31). The other thirty-seven thetic intervals are imperfect consonances (twelve are minor third, eight are major third, ten are minor sixth, and seven are major sixth). At the beginning of each measure, the Descant starts with either B flat or B natural and the Cantus Firmus always commences with a G4. The alternation of these two thirds reinforces G4 as a note given consonant support and also emphasizes the melodic semitone interval Bb-B as one of the essential intervals of this movement. In the A1 section, the two thirds, {G, Bb} and {G, B}, alternate at the beginning of each measure. In the A2 section, the two thirds do not strictly alternate. Instead, we hear <m3, M3, M3, m3>, so that the downbeat in the last measure reinforces in particular the {G, Bb} minor third, which is the first thetic interval in m. 1. Unlike the first thetic interval of each measure, the last thetic interval does not demonstrate any specific pattern. However, most of the latter are consonances or imperfect consonances (two are minor third, one is major third, two are perfect fifth, five are minor sixth, and one is Major sixth).<sup>29</sup> In Figure 8, the second and fourth thetic

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<sup>29</sup> Hohmaier conveys that similar melodic and harmonic relationships are found in central places of *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza* Op. 7. See, for interest, Hohmaier, Simone. "Mutual Roots of Musical Thinking: György Kurtág, Péter Eötvös and their Relation to Ernő Lendvai's Theories." *Studia Musicologica-Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43:3-4 (2002): 228. She also claims that the relationships are similar to those in Bartók's Second Violin Concerto in which the reduction of the harmonic relations in the bass line clearly manifests the thirds formed by {B, G, E, G#} which result in the famous major-minor chord, an important structural feature in Bartók's composition. See the same Hohmaier article, 227.

intervals comprise sixths with some occasional fifths. The third thetic intervals are usually thirds, with some fourths and sixths. Instead of a clear consecutive melodic pattern being found in Op. 2, a harmonic interval pattern is employed in the third movement of Op. 25. This pattern is found in the first three thetic intervals of each measure and is based on harmonic thirds and sixths. According to the third column in Figure 8, eight out of the eleven measures of section A1 and A2 have an interval pattern of an ascending third, then a descending sixth, followed by an ascending third for the first three thetic intervals.

From the above analysis, the utilization of intervals in the Descant and Cantus Firmus demonstrate that semitones, thirds, and sixths are most prevalent in the A sections. Additionally, the analysis of the two parts manifests that the alternation between major and minor intervals of the same size, i.e. major third and minor third, or major sixth or minor sixth, is a common feature of Kurtág's compositions.

## **Characteristics of the Voice Part**

The voice part will be analyzed before the bass because it maintains a closer relationship with the Cantus Firmus and Descant. The voice does not exhibit a fixed contour and it moves in a freer manner than both the Cantus Firmus and Descant. It is composed of a mixture of open notes and solid notes with a range that spans an octave. The accompaniment and the voice in Kurtág's pieces always have a very close relationship as exhibited in the second and ninth section of the *Bornemisza concerto*. The piano

accompaniment directly shadows the voice in inversion or retrograde.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the second column of Figure 9 demonstrates the relationship between the voice's melodic movement and the Descant and Cantus Firmus. The top row displays the pitches in the voice while the bottom row shows how either the Descant or the Cantus Firmus are identical or similar to the voice. This figure shows how the voice mainly moves in either unison or similar motion with the Descant and Cantus Firmus. In mm. 3 and 7, the voice moves in unison with the Cantus Firmus and in the first half of m. 5 the voice is slightly delayed by two CF notes. In m. 8, the voice moves in unison with the Descant. In section A2, the voice has identical pitches to the Descant except that it is delayed with a varied rhythm. The third column of Figure 9 shows the melodic intervals of the voice. At times the voice is very similar in melodic character to the Descant; at other times (especially mm. 3, 5, and 7) it closely resembles the Cantus Firmus and has a preponderance of descending semitones. Overall, in the A1 section, the voice has 28 consecutive intervals (within vocal phrases), of which 19 are semitones (all descending).

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<sup>30</sup> McLay, "The music of György Kurtág 1959-1980," 131.

**Figure 9: The Pitches and Melodic Intervals of the Voice and the Relationship between the Voice, the Cantus Firmus, and the Descant**

M	Pitches (V=voice, CF=Cantus Firmus, D= Descant)	Melodic intervals
3	V <Gb4, F4, E4, Eb4, D4, A4>	m2, m2, m2, m2, P5
	CF <G4, F#4, F4, E4, D#4, D4, C#4, C4>	
4	V <Bb4, Db5, C5, E5, G#4>	m3, m2, M3, m6
5	V <G#4, G4, F#4, F4, E4, Eb4>	A1, m2, A1, m2, A1
	CF <G4, F#4, F4, E4, Eb4, D4, Db4, C4>	
6	V <D4, A4, G#4>	P5, m2
7	V <G4, F#4, F4, E4, Eb4, D4, Db4, C4>	m2, A1, m2, A1, m2, A1, m2
	CF <G4, F#4, F4, E4, D#4, D4, C#4, C4>	
8	V <Bb4, Db5, Gb4, F4, Ab4>	m3, P5, m2, m3
	D <B4, Db5, A4, F4, Ab4>	
9	V <E4, C3>	M3
30	V <B4, D5, G4, A4>	m3, P5, M2
	D <B4, D4, G4, A4>	
31	V <A4, B4>	M2
	D <A4, B4>	

Since the voice is closely related to the Descant and Cantus Firmus, we will take a closer look at these three parts. Figure 10 is a dissonance profile showing the relationships between them. The text of the poem is shown in the middle column, with the consonance and dissonance profile of Descant and Cantus Firmus on the right column. In the middle column, the syllables are separated by hyphens to indicate the changes of pitch in the voice part. The text is mostly in a syllabic setting, except for a change to melismatic setting in line a2. The numbers on the dissonance profile column (column 3) represent the degree of dissonance formed between the three parts. In this example, any intervals that



are written or sound as unison, thirds, perfect fourths, perfect fifths, sixths, and octaves are considered as consonances, whereas seconds and sevenths are considered as dissonances. The hyphens separating the numbers work the same way as the middle column. The number 0 indicates that both the Descant and the Cantus Firmus are in consonance with the voice; the number 1 indicates that one part is dissonant with the voice; and the number 2 indicates that both parts are dissonant with the voice.

**Figure 10: The Dissonance Profile for Voice versus the Cantus Firmus and the Descant**

Section A1		Dissonance profile
Line a1	< Hier ru-het in Gott >	<0 01-0 0 00>
Line a2	< The-re-si-a Hen-gl >	<1-00-0-1 11221-1>
Line a3	< Ge-stor-ben am	<1-0-0 0
	Sie-ben und zwan-zig-sten März	-----
	Neun-zehn-hun-dert-neun	0-0-0-1-0
	und drei ßig >	0 0 0>
Line a4	< Im Al-ter von neun und	<1 0-0 00 00
	Zwan-zig	0-0>
	Jah,ren >	-----
Section A2		
Line a5	< Ru-he sanft in Frie-den.>	<0-0 0-1-1 0 0-0-2-0>

On the table, “0” is most prominent, showing that the voice is generally consonant with both the Descant and Cantus Firmus, except for text line a2, which declaims the name of the deceased woman, Theresia Hengl. The use of dissonance with either the Descant or Cantus Firmus elicits tension and underscores the importance of her name, especially the last name Hengl, which has the same pronunciation as Engel (the German word for

"angel"). The use of a melismatic text setting and the correspondence of the word "Theresia" with the highest note (E5) of this third movement reinforces the importance of the proclamation of her name as an expressive climax in this section.

Since major and minor thirds are prominent intervals in this movement, there are some formations of complete diatonic triads which seem to be used principally for word painting purposes to emphasize important words. They do not seem to participate in any kind of thorough tonal structuring. In mm. 4 and 5, all three parts (voice, Cantus Firmus, and Descant) coincide to form major triads. The first triad is formed in m. 4 on CF5, with the notes Eb4, Ab4, and C5. Kurtág uses this Ab major triad to emphasize the name of the deceased woman, Theresia, (on the syllable "si"). The second complete triad is formed in m. 5 on CF7, with the notes Db4, Ab4, and F4. Here, the major triad brings attention to the word "gestorben" (on the stressed syllable "stor") which means "died" in English. Major triads are formed elsewhere, but they do not involve simultaneous attacks. For example the last notes of m. 5 form an Ab major triad involving the notes C4, Ab4, and Eb4; and in m. 8 during CF6 a D major triad is composed of the notes D4, A4 and Gb4 (F#). These two triads do not emphasize important ideas in the text and also do not stand out from the music significantly. Note that the bass part is dissonant with the triads just described.

### **Characteristics of the Bass Part**

The bass enters before the voice. Its range is wider than the other three parts, and spans more than an octave. It moves using varied durations, with semitones and major seconds

being the most frequent melodic intervals. It never doubles any other parts and always forms ic1 (dissonance) with one of the concurrent notes in the other parts except for CF3 in m. 5 and CF2 in m. 29. The contour of the bass line is mostly ascending and in contrary motion with the other three parts. It essentially works independent of the other three parts and often moves against them, especially the voice.

### ***The Use of Aggregates***

Péter Halász points out that Kurtág used some 12-tone techniques in his earlier works (such as the *String quartet* Op. 1, *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza* Op. 7, and the *Messages of the late R.V. Troussouva in Russian* Op. 17), but notes that he later grew out of using the system.<sup>31</sup> During his earlier period, Kurtág split up the 12-tone row and assigned its chromatic cells to different types of motion and timbre.<sup>32</sup> Whereas Webern would focus on using cells from one row, Kurtág would use cells from different row forms. A good example of building music with small melodic-rhythmic cells in 12-tone music would be Op. 7.<sup>33</sup> The rows that Kurtág has selected seldom appear complete. They are usually either dissolved halfway through, or do not emerge until later in the piece. In the fifth movement of his Op. 28, for instance, Kurtág borrowed row forms from Webern's *String Quartet* (also numbered Op. 28), but instead of using them in a highly ordered fashion, he changed the order of the pitches or repeated some pitches when

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<sup>31</sup> Péter Halász, "On Kurtág's Dodecaphony," *Studia Musicologica-Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43:3-4 (2002): 236.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>33</sup> Beatrice Barazzoni, "Kurtág's Music: The Spectacle of Nature, the Breath of History—from op. 7 to 27," *Studia Musicologica-Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43:3-4 (2002): 256.

needed.<sup>34</sup> McLay claims that Kurtág also likes to use semi-combinatorial rows, usually with 012346 hexachords.<sup>35</sup>

In the third of the *Three Inscriptions*, Kurtág did not use any of the serial organizations or semi-combinatorial rows. But Kurtág does use aggregates or near aggregates; four of these appear in the bass part. The first bass aggregate is completed on the first beat of m. 7 with the note A1. This aggregate contains some repeated notes, and it starts with A#1 and ends with A1, which emphasizes the semitone movement that is so prominent elsewhere in this piece. In section B, mm. 10-19, the bass line is missing only the G and D, and these pitch classes are prominent in the Descant and Cantus Firmus drone, so the soprano's melody is therefore set against an unfolding aggregate. This aggregate ends with the E#4 in m. 19, which is emphasized as the bottom note of a *sforzando* chord. Beginning with this *sforzando* chord, the bass also forms another aggregate with the G4 D5 and E6 from the Descant and Cantus Firmus in mm. 19-22. In the A2 section, the bass aggregate is missing only E (which is used in the Cantus Firmus).

Incomplete aggregates also appear in other parts, such as the Descant in section A1. This aggregate is also missing only E and could only be completed if the E4 from the Cantus Firmus would be included. The voice part of section A1 is missing only B, which is used in the Descant. Kurtág made use of the completions of these melodic aggregates and near aggregates to suggest the sectional divisions of this movement.

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<sup>34</sup> Benjamin Frandzel, "A Canon Across Time: György Kurtág's "Officium Breve in memoriam Andreae Szervánszky," op. 28," *Studia Musicologica-Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43:3-4 (2002): 388.

<sup>35</sup> McLay, "The music of György Kurtág 1959-1980," 74-75.

In addition to near aggregates in individual melodic lines, aggregates are also often formed by combining the four parts in section A1. For example, in m. 3, the note A4 on the word “Gott” (which means God) is the first A so far, and it completes an aggregate (with the four parts). A second aggregate is found in m. 4, and is also completed by the Descant A4 on the first syllable of the name “Hengl.” A third aggregate is found in mm. 5-6 and is also completed by an A4, in the voice. The fourth aggregate is from m. 7 to the first beat of m. 8. It is completed with the Ab1 in the bass and the B4 in the Descant on the downbeat of m. 8, where the voice is pausing between phrases. The first note of the last aggregate in section A1 overlaps with the end of the fourth aggregate. This aggregate starts on the initial B4 of m.8, and ends on the Ab4 in the voice and the Descant at the end of m.8. Kurtág sometimes uses the completion of aggregates to highlight prominent words of the text.

### ***The Relationships between the Bass and the Voice***

Since the Cantus Firmus and the Descant work as a voice-pair, the soprano and bass line can be considered as a second voice-pair. This voice-pair is examined in Figure 11a and b to look for anything that is significant. Figure 11a shows the intervals between the voice and the bass and the use of consonances and dissonances. The second column shows the interval classes between the two parts with each interval class being separated by a comma. This figure shows that ic1 is heard most frequently, followed by ic2; on the other hand, ic6 is the least used interval class. 24 of 43 intervals are dissonances, and 19 are consonances (14 are imperfect consonances and 5 are perfect). This figure shows that

three out of seven phrases (mm. 3, 4, and 8) close on consonant intervals; four out of seven phrases (mm. 5, 7, 30, and 31) end on dissonant intervals between the bass and the voice. The chart in Figure 11b shows the number of interval classes used as well as how dissonances and consonances are used in the bass and the voice.

**Figure 11a: Bass-voice Relationships (Interval Classes)**

Measures	Intervals
3	<1, 1, 2, 4, 1, 1, 4>
4	<0, 2, 1, 4, 1, 6, 5>
5	<3, 6, 4, 2, 1, 1, 2, 3, 2>
7	<2, 3, 1, 2, 4, 5, 3, 2>
8	<0, 2, 1, 4, 3, 1, 5>
30	<4, 4, 4, 1>
31	<1>

**Figure 11b: Interval Classes and Dissonance being Used**

Interval type	Frequency
ic0	2 times
ic1	13 times
ic2	9 times
ic3	5 times
ic4	9 times
ic5	3 times
ic6	2 times
Dissonant intervals	24 times
Imperfect consonance	14 times
Perfect consonance	5 times

Figure 12 shows the dissonance profile of the bass and the voice as well as how the dissonances and consonances are distributed within each phrase. The commas represent each coincidence between the bass and the voice. The number 0 represents either perfect or imperfect consonance, and number 1 represents dissonance. The numbers displayed in Figure 12 demonstrate that the bass and voice are mostly dissonant with each other, since number 1 appears 24 out of 40 times (60%) while 0 appears 16 out of 40 times (40%). This figure also shows that the intervals in mm. 3, 4, and 8 move from dissonance to consonance, whereas the intervals in mm. 5, 7, and 30 move from consonance to dissonance. Kurtág uses dissonant intervals to highlight important words such as “Theresia Hengl” and “gestorben” (even though he also highlights the word “gestorben” with a major triad in the Descant and Cantus Firmus, as mentioned in the previous section).

**Figure 12: The Dissonance Profile for the Voice versus the Bass**

Measure	Dissonance profile
3	<1, 11, 0, 1, 1, 0>
4	<1, 1, 0, 1, 1, 0>
5	<0, 1, 0, 1, 1, 11, 01>
7	<10, 11, 00, 1>
8	<1, 1, 0, 0, 1, 0>
30	<0, 0, 0, 1>
31	<1>

### ***The Relationships between the Bass and the Cantus Firmus/Descant Pair***

Figure 13 is a dissonance profile chart showing the relationships between the three parts in the piano accompaniment (bass, Cantus Firmus, and Descant). The commas function in the same manner as Figure 8, and the numbers work the same way as Figure 12. Commas are inserted between each bass note, and the decision as to whether the intervals formed are consonant or dissonant between the bass and Cantus Firmus or the bass and the Descant depends on how they sound instead of how they are written. The top rows of this figure demonstrate that the bass part is dissonant with either the Cantus Firmus or Descant at the beginning and ending of each phrase. This figure also displays that 5 out of 60 times the bass is consonant with both the Cantus Firmus and Descant, 46 out of 60 times the bass is dissonant with at least one part, and 9 out of 60 times the bass is dissonant with both parts. On Figure 13, the second row of information for each measure displays the harmonic intervals between the bass and the Descant (D), while the third rows display the harmonic intervals between the bass and the Cantus Firmus (CF). The result manifests that major sevenths are used most frequently, especially for the phrase endings (except m. 30), and either the Cantus Firmus or the Descant is dissonant with the bass at the major seventh (enharmonically diminished octave) or the major second at every phrase ending (except m. 30).



**Figure 13: The Harmonic Intervals and the Dissonance Profile of the Bass versus the Cantus Firmus and the Descant**

Measure	Dissonance profile
2	<1, 1, 1>
	D m2, m3, m3
	CF m6, m3, d8 (M7)
3	<1, 1 1, 1, 1, 1, 1>
	D P4, m6-----, M7, A2(m3), m2, A5(m6)
	CF m2, d8 m7, A5(m6), M7, A3(P4), M7
4	<1 2, 1 2, 1, 1, 1, 2>
	D M7---, d8(M7)----, d4(M3), P4, P5, d8(M7)
	CF P5 A4, m3 M2, d8(M7), M7, M7, d3(M2)
5	<1 1, 0, 2, 1, 0, 1, 1>
	D d8(M7)---, dd5(P4), m2, m6, P5, d3(M2), d6(P5)
	CF m6 P5, d6(P5), M2, d8(M7), M6, d6(P5), d8(M7)
7	<2 1, 1 1, 1 1, 1 2>
	D m2 ---, m6 ---, M7 ---, M7 ---
	CF M7 M6, d8(M7) m7, A5(m6) P5, A2(m3) M2
8	<1 1, 0 0, 1, 2, 1, 1>
	D A2(m3) ---, d4(M3) ---, P5, A4, m2, P5
	CF M7 A6(m7), m6 P5, m2, d8(M7), d7(M6), M2
29	<0, 1, 1, 2>
	D m6, m2, dd5(P4), d8 (M7)
	CF M3, M3, m2, d3(M2)
30	<1, 1 1 1, 1, 1 1>
	D M3, m6 --- m2, M3, m2 ---
	CF M7, d8(M7) m7 d7(M6), M7, A3(P4) M3
31	<1, 2, 1, 1>
	D m2, dd8(m7), m2, M7
	CF m6, m2, d7(M6), m3
32	<1, 1, 1>
	D d8(M7), m2, m3
	CF P5, m3, d8(M7)

### ***Neo-Riemannian Approach—Pc Set Classes and the Tonnetz***

In the piano accompaniment (the bass, the Descant, and the Cantus Firmus), very few diatonic triads are formed. Instead, less tonal pitch-class sets and set classes are utilized in this movement. Figure 14 displays all the pitch-class sets which are formed harmonically by the bass, the Descant, and the Cantus Firmus in the A sections. The rows are organized by measure numbers and the columns are arranged according to the Cantus Firmus notes (CF1, CF2, etc.) since the Cantus Firmus performs the most steady attacks throughout the A sections. The most frequently used set class is (014) which occurs more than one third of the time in the A sections; set classes (015) and (013) take up another one-third of the total. The remaining set classes, such as (012), (016), (024), (025), (027), and (048), take up the remaining third. Kurtág repeatedly uses set class (014) in his compositions. It is found in his *String quartet* Op.1 and the fifth movement of the *Officium breve in memoriam Andreae Szervansky*, Op. 28 subtitled (Fantasia on the harmony of the Webern Canon). In Williams's words, "Op. 28 takes on the harmonic tendencies of the Webern canon, especially its use of the pitch class set (014) to create major/minor sounding tonalities."<sup>36</sup> Kurtág uses many (014) trichords in the third movement of Op.25 because it contains semitones and thirds, and these remain the most prevalent intervals in this movement.

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<sup>36</sup> Williams, "Kurtág, Modernity, Modernisms," 63.

**Figure 14: Pitch Classes Formed between the Bass, the Cantus Firmus, and the Descant**

M	CF1	CF2	CF3	CF4	CF5	CF6	CF7	CF8
Section A1								
2		{F#,A#,B}		{C#,D,E}		{D,D#,F#}		
		BI(015)		C#(013)		D(014)		
						1		
3		{E#,F#,Bb}	{D,F,F#}	{D,E,F#}	{D#,F#,G}	{D,Eb,F#}	{Ab,A,C}	{A,C,Db}
		E#(015)	F#I(014)	D(024)	GI(014)	D(014)	Ab(014)	DbI(014)
			2		3	4	5	6
4	{C,E,G}	{B,C,F#}	{Db,D,F}	{Db,D,E}	{Eb,E,Ab}	{D,Eb,Ab}	{A,C#,D}	{A,A#,C}
	C(047)	CI(016)	Db(014)	Db(013)	Eb(015)	D(016)	DI(015)	A(013)
			7					
5	{G,Bb,B}	{F#,Bb,B}	{C#,Eb,F}	{D,Eb,E}	{C,Eb,E}	{C,D,F}	{Db,F#,Ab}	{Ab,C,C#}
	BI(014)	BI(015)	C#(024)	D(012)	EI(014)	C(025)	F#(027)	C#I(015)
	8				9			
7	{G,A,Bb}	{F#,A,Bb}	{D,F,F#}	{D,E,F#}	{D#,F#,G}	{D,F#,G}	{A,Bb,C#}	{A,Bb,C}
	BbI(013)	BbI(014)	F#I(014)	D(024)	GI(014)	GI(015)	A(014)	A(013)
		10	11		12		13	
8	{G,Ab,B}	{F#,Ab,B}	{C,Db,F}	{C,Db,E}	{D,Eb,A}	{D,Eb,A}	{Db,E,F}	{Ab,C,Db}
	G(014)	F#(025)	C(015)	C(014)	EbI(016)	EbI(016)	FI(014)	DbI(015)
	14			15			16	

M	CF1	CF2	CF3	CF4	CF5	CF6	CF7	CF8
Section A2								
29		{D,F#,Bb}		{C,Db,E}		{C#,D,Gb}		{A#,A,C}
		D(048)		C(014)		C#(015)		A(013)
				17				18
30		{F#,G,B}	{D,F,F#}	{D,E,F#}	{Eb,F#,G}	{D,Eb,G}	{Ab,A,C#}	{Ab,A,C}
		F#(015)	F#I(014)	D(024)	GI(014)	D(015)	Ab(015)	Ab(014)
			19		20			21
31		{F#,A#,B}		{Db,D#,E}		{D,E#,F#}		{G#,A,C}
		BI(015)		EI(013)		F#I(014)		G#(014)
						22		23
32		{F#,Bb,B}		{C#,D,E}		{D,D#,F#}		
		BI(015)		C#(013)		D(014)		
						24		

Arnold Whittall notes that in one of the pieces set to Hölderlin's poem "Brief an die Mütter," Kurtág often incorporates the pc set class (016) melodically.<sup>37</sup> An example of a melodic (016) trichord is found in the third movement of Op. 25. In m.6, the voice part D4 moves to A4 and then drops to G#4 which creates a pitch-class set that belongs to the set class (016): <D4, A4, G#4> = (016). Additionally, set classes (013) and (014) are formed melodically in this movement. They are found in m. 4: <Bb4, Db5, C5> = (013), <Db5, C5, E5> = (014), m. 8: <Gb4, F4, Ab4> = (013), and from mm. 8-9: <F4, Ab4, E4> = (014) in the voice part, and m. 5: <B1, C#2, D2> = (013), <C#2, D2, E2> = (013), and <D2, E2, F2> = (013) in the bass part.

<sup>37</sup> Arnold Whittall, "Plotting the Path, Prolonging the Moment: Kurtág's Settings of German," *Contemporary Music Review* 20 (2001): 104.

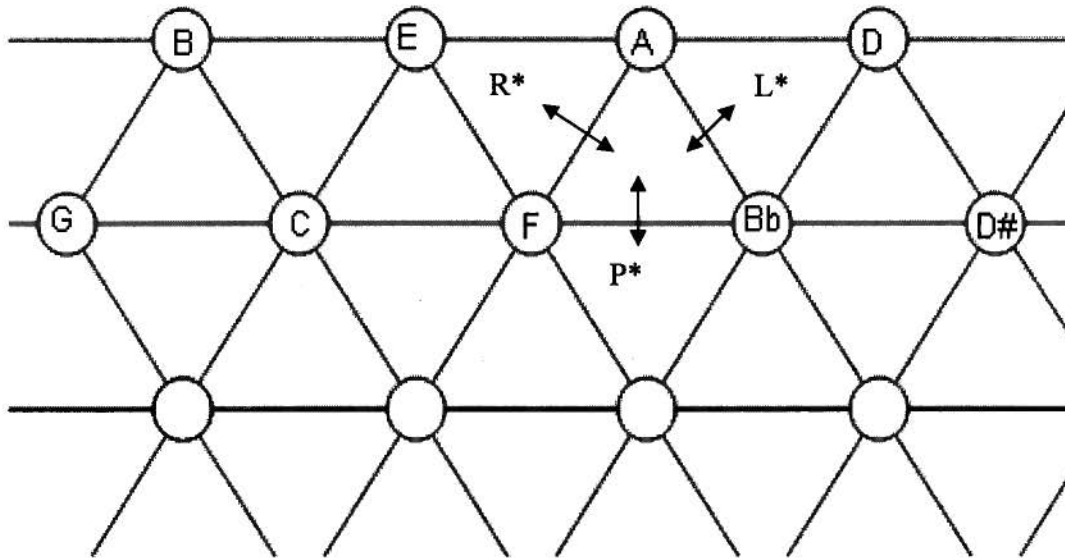
The utilization of set classes in this movement can be analyzed with a neo-Riemannian approach and the relationships are revealed on a *Tonnetz*. John Clough states that different theorists have analyzed pieces such as Brahms' *Concerto for Violin and Cello*, Kurtág's *Wind quintet*, Op. 2, and Kurtág's Op. 24 *Kafka-Fragmente* with Neo-Riemannian theory.<sup>38</sup> In the *Wind Quintet* example, the pitch class set class (015) is repeated constantly. Each time it is repeated, the new chord always has at least one pitch that is shared with the previous (015) trichord, resulting in the possibility of building a (145) *Tonnetz*, as shown in Figure 15<sup>39</sup>). The numbers 1, 4, and 7, represent the number of semitones formed between two of the pitches. For example, in the pitch class set {F, A, Bb}, "1" represents the number of semitones between A and Bb, "4" represents the number of semitones between F and A, and "7" represents the number of semitones between Bb and F. The trichords laid out in the (145) *Tonnetz* are related by one of the "L\*", "P\*", or "R\*" relationships. The label "L\*" signifies the inversion that preserves the smallest interval, "P\*" preserves the largest interval, and "R\*" preserves the middle-sized interval. The passage in the *Wind Quintet* navigates this *Tonnetz* fragment by a consistent zigzag, starting at G: <G, B, C, E, F, A, Bb, D, D#>, and that every sequence of three pcs forms a (015) trichord, in an alternating sequence of L\* and R\* relations (but no P\* relations in this instance).

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<sup>38</sup> John Clough, "Diatonic Trichords in Two Pieces from Kurtág's *Kafka-Fragmente*: A Neo-Riemannian Approach," *Studia Musicologica-Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43:3-4 (2002): 334-35.

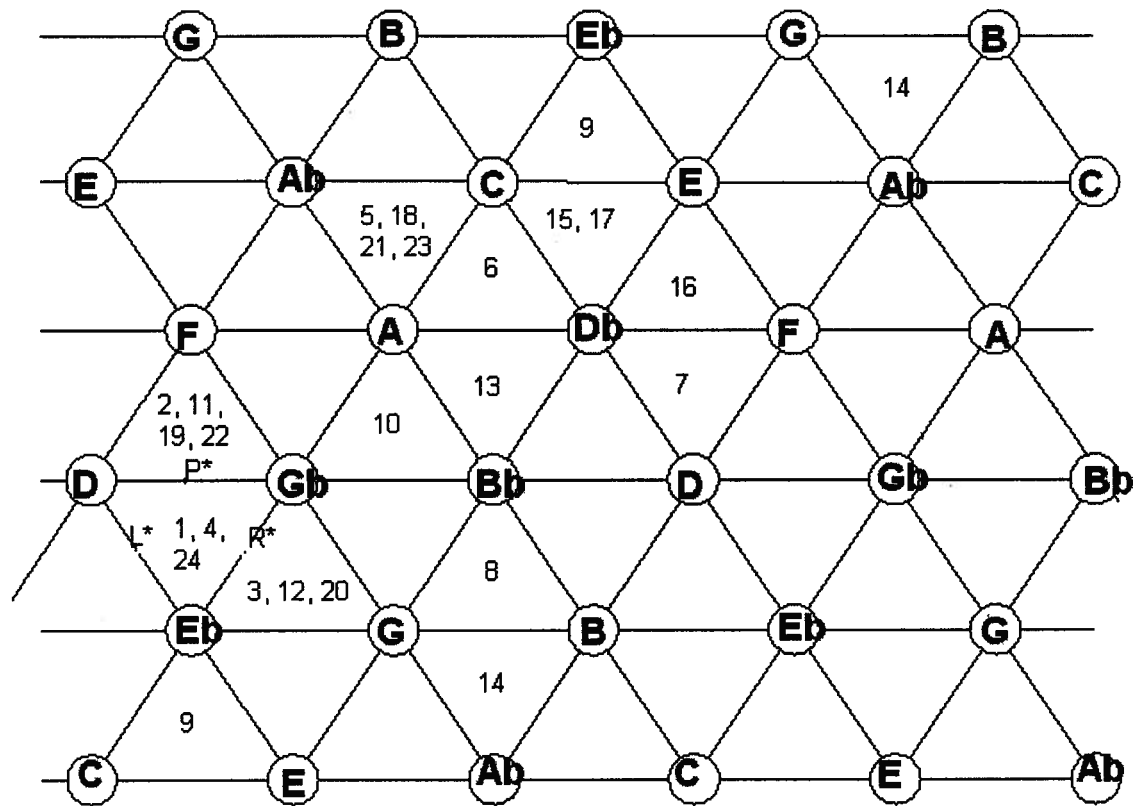
<sup>39</sup> Figure 15 is based on Clough's Example 4a, *ibid.*, 337.

Figure 15: (145) *Tonnetz* for the Opening of Movement Five of the *Wind Quintet*



In response to the (014) trichords in Figure 14, a (134) *Tonnetz* has been set up in Figure 16. The numbers shown in this example represent the appearance order of the pc sets in Figure 14. Some Neo-Riemannian relationships occur between several (014) trichords but they do not form a regular pattern required to create a closed cycle. Most of the pc sets in the (134) *Tonnetz* are related by “R\*,” which means that the common pitches between the two pc sets are related by the mid-sized interval, in this case a minor third. The first pc set and the second pc set are the only pair that are related by “P\*,” and they share a major third. The third and fourth, fifth and sixth, fifteenth and sixteenth pc sets are related by “R\*.” There are no “L\*” relationships between consecutive trichords in this passage.

Figure 16: The (134) Tonnetz



### Wedge-like Figures in the Bass Part

In “Kurtág, Eötvös and their Relation to “Lendvai’s Theories,” Hohmaier mentions that Bartók has greatly influenced Peter Eötvös, a younger colleague of Kurtág. Eötvös’s music shows great interest in intervallic structure such as in his piece *Kosmos*, where “the intervallic space is broadened symmetrically... The range of the ostinato-like pitches in the middle register increases constantly and is filled out chromatically.”<sup>40</sup> Dina Lentsner claims that ‘wedging’ or symmetrical expansion of musical space is a common feature of

<sup>40</sup> Hohmaier, “Mutual Roots of Musical Thinking,” 227.

Kurtág's compositions.<sup>41</sup> In addition to the works of Bartók and Eötvös, the utilization of this technique also relates to Webern's Op. 31 sixth movement. Kurtág uses this technique in his *String quartet* Op. 1 as well as in the second movement of Op. 28. Figure 17 shows that in the section A1 of the Op. 25 third movement, mm. 3-4, the pitches <E#2, F#2, G2, Eb2, Ab2, Db2, C3, D2> create a wedge-like figure in the bass line. By pairing up the pitches, an expansion of musical space is formed (a minor second <1>, major third <4>, perfect fifth <7>, and minor seventh <10>) by expanding three semitones per pair. Kurtág utilizes the wedge-like figure as the voice enters at the beginning of the song to evoke a broad feeling.

**Figure 17: The Wedge-like Structure in the Bass Line in mm. 3-4 in the Third Movement**

**Source:** *Three Old Inscriptions for voice and piano Op. 25*. Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest editions:14.

<sup>41</sup> Dina Lentsner, "The Structure of What is Beyond the Words: Musico-Poetic Analysis of the Fragment from "Scenes from a Novel," Op. 19 by György Kurtág," *Studia Musicologica-Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43:3-4 (2002): 328.



## **Conclusion of Section A**

The two A sections demonstrate many of Kurtág's common compositional techniques: the avoidance of repeating identical materials, the use of ostinato (Cantus Firmus), the use of prevalent intervals such as semitones, thirds and fifths, the alternation between major and minor thirds and sixths, the use of aggregates, the use of specific pc set classes such as (013), (014), and (016), the use of dissonances and chords to highlight important text, and the use of wedge-like structures. Kurtág also uses C and G as two points of reference in the pitch structure the A sections. Most of these features reappear in the B section.

## ***B Section***

As the music approaches section B, the tempo changes from calm and slow to livelier, and animated. Concurrently, the note values change from four open notes to two open notes per measure. This also aids in creating the sense of a faster tempo. In this section, the young woman narrates in first person, describing how she died from a fever. The texture of this section differs from that in the A sections. In section A1, the music is composed of four contrapuntal parts but in the first half of section B, the music consists of three parts: the voice; a drone (the previous Cantus Firmus and Descant allied as one part forming a perfect fifth on the middle staff); and the bass part. In the first half of this section, the bass moves as an individual part against the drone, but in the second half, it joins the drone to act as an accompaniment to the voice. In the B section, the music is predominantly based on perfect fifths with focus on G4 as a reference pitch.

## Characteristics of the Voice Part

The voice in this section is quite different from that in section A1. In the A sections, it is comprised of an equal balance of stepwise and skip motions. In the first half of section B, mm. 10-22, its range is narrower <G4-D5> and has more stepwise motion. The use of a folk tune adds a nostalgic flavor to the piece, providing a stronger nationalistic sense. In addition, the use of a simple diatonic folk tune evokes an innocent, joyful, and warm impression. The first four measures, mm. 10-13, contain the first five notes of the G ascending diatonic scale outlining the interval of a perfect fifth. Williams mentions that Kurtág frequently uses perfect fifth in his music because it plays a purely motivic role.<sup>42</sup> In mm. 14-15, the voice changes slightly by wandering back and forth in semitone and whole tone motion in order to accentuate the meaning of the text “the fever devoured me.” Her dizziness and sickness are depicted by the rising and falling of the voice. In mm. 19-21, a small wedge-like figure in the voice concludes the first half of the section. This figure (see Figure 18) contains the pitches <C5, A4, C#5, G4, Bb4, A4>, which form intervals of a minor third <C5, A4>, major third <A4, C#5>, augmented fourth <C#5, G4>, followed by a minor third <G4, Bb4>, and ending on a minor second <Bb4, A4>. The intervals formed are the most prevalent ones in the entire movement except for the augmented fourth which is only prevalent in section B.

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<sup>42</sup> Williams, “Kurtág, Modernity, Modernisms,” 57.

**Figure 18: Wedge-like Structure in the Voice in mm. 19-21 in the Third Movement**



**Source:** *Three Old Inscriptions for voice and piano Op. 25*. Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest editions:16.

The second half of this section, m. 23 to the first half of m. 27, has a wider range that spans from C4 to D5. Instead of utilizing stepwise motion, the voice moves in triadic fashion or skips in fifths so as to convey the change of mood. In this part, the text reflects the helplessness and resentment or bitterness because it is God's will that "Theresia" has had to die young.

### **The Church Bell Ostinato (Descant and Cantus Firmus)**

In this section, the previous Cantus Firmus and Descant have merged into one part, which will be termed the "Bell ostinato." Pedal points appear in Kurtág's works for different purposes.<sup>43</sup> In some pieces, they are used for percussive effects. McLay mentions that pedals are used pictorially in Kurtág's vocal works, such as *Eszká-emlekezaj*, Op. 12. The constant G# to D of the piece suggests a dance-like vamp and also the regular pushing of a lawn-mower. Also, a constant returning to C suggests determination to keep something in mind. In the fourth movement of *Splinters*, Op 6c, subtitled "In Memoriam Stefan Romascanu," the presence of a low pedal D in the cimbalom part represents a tolling bell

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<sup>43</sup> McLay, "The music of György Kurtág 1959-1980," 85-86.

at the end of a lament. Similar to the tolling bell, in the first half of the B section of Op. 25, the Descant plays a D pedal while the Cantus Firmus plays a G pedal. The two parts form a perfect fifth drone that resembles church bells and creates a religious atmosphere that suits the title of this piece *On a Cross in the Cemetery at Mecseknádasd*. The church bell ostinato commences with breve notes (double whole notes), but as it reaches m. 16, the breve notes are replaced by whole notes so as to increase the music's intensity. This bell ostinato is later joined in by the bass line in m. 23 and persists throughout the entire section B. The use of bell patterns is a common feature of Kurtág's pieces. Williams points out that there is a similar open fifth bell pattern in the second movement of Kurtág's Op. 28.<sup>44</sup> Grmela also mentions that Kurtág's piece *Bells—Hommage a Stravinsky* contains a series of chords that are reminiscent of the bells at the end of Stravinsky's *Les Noces*.<sup>45</sup>

## Characteristics of the Bass Part

Similar to section A, the bass voice in the first half of the B section moves in dissonance against the voice and the bell ostinato. The range of the bass is very wide, from C#1 to D# 5. It principally moves in whole tones, thirds, and fifths with some occasional semitones. Probably as it relates to word painting in mm. 14-15, the voice and bass both become more active in order to intensify to the word "fever." In these two measures, both parts are more chromatic melodically, and dissonant with each other which increases the tension. The short bass melody in mm. 14-15 can be heard melodically, centered on its closing G#4, which concurrently forms a tritone with the D5 in the voice. Approaching

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<sup>44</sup> Williams, "Kurtág, Modernity, Modernisms," 56.

<sup>45</sup> Grmela, "Recall and Repetition in Some Works by Kurtág," 372.

mm. 19-22, the chords become more prominent in the bass so as to foreshadow the combination of the bass line and the bell ostinato in mm. 23-27. In this passage, the bass extends an 8-note descending cycle of fifths from the D5 and G4 of the bell ostinato. Each time the bell ostinato is played, a new note is added in the bass so that the chain stretches from D5 down to Db1 in m. 27 at the end of B section <D5, G4, C4, F3, Bb2, Eb2, Ab1, Db1>. The use of cycles of fifths is a common feature in Kurtág's music as exemplified in his Op. 2, where the flute part consists of a regular cycle of fifths, and the last movement of his quartet Op. 1 which employs a nearly complete cycle of fifths.<sup>46</sup>

### ***Tertian and Quartal Chord Formations***

More melodic and harmonic chordal figures occur in this section than in the A sections. In mm. 10-13, and 16-17, the voice melody outlines a G major triad with the first five notes of a G diatonic scale. In mm. 16-18, the bass melody <C#4, F#3, B#3, D#4, F#4, G#4> can be heard as a dominant seventh chord first inversion of the melody's initial C#4, which creates a dissonant counter-polarity to the G major triad formed by the voice and the bell ostinato. This counter-polarity possesses two aspects: the "tonicized" bass C#4 is a tritone from the G4 "tonicized" by the bell ostinato, and the dominant seventh chord based on G# in the bass melody is a semitone from the G based voice melody and the bell ostinato. The intervals (tritone, and semitone) generated in this counter-polarity comprise the prominent intervals of this section. In m. 20, the bass part forms a B major triad on the downbeat, and on the second beat, the voice forms a G minor triad with the

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<sup>46</sup> McLay, "The music of György Kurtág 1959-1980," 137.

bell ostinato. In mm. 23-26, the voice part mostly outlines the G major triad as the bass builds the descending chain of fifths as described above. Most of the chords formed in this section are centered on G4, which is one of the reference pitches of this section.

### ***Voice versus Bass***

As in the A section, we can analyze the voice and bass as a pair. The chart in Figure 19 consists of consonances, dissonances, and intervals between the voice and bass. The top rows of the second and fourth column show whether the harmonic intervals created are consonant or dissonant; the bottom rows show the harmonic intervals formed between the voice and bass. Commas are used to separate each coincidence between the two parts.

When a coincidence has more than two notes, as in m. 13 (the bass voice has a chord with A and E against a single note D in the voice), the individual intervals (perfect fourth and major second) created between each bass note and the voice are grouped by the same comma. Figure 19 shows that more than half of the time the voice and bass form a dissonance, usually incorporating the interval of the semitone and tritone.

**Figure 19: The Dissonance Profile and Harmonic Intervals between the Voice and the Bass**

M.	Dissonance profile Intervals between the 2 parts	M.	Dissonance profile Intervals between the 2 parts
10	< 1, 0>	16	<1, 1, 1>
	M2, m3		m2, m2, m2
11	<1>	17	<1, 0>
	m2		m2, d4 (m3)
12	<0, 1>	18	<0, 0>
	P4, d5		m3, P4
13	<0 1>	19	< -- ,1>
	P4 M2		-- , m2
14	<1 0, -- 1, 1>	20	<0 0 1, 1 0>
	m2 P1,-- m2, m2		m6 d4(m3) m2, m2 A2 (m3)
15	<0, 1, 1 >	21	<1, 0 1 1>
	P4, d5, d5		m2, m6 m2 d5

### **Pc Set Classes Used in the B Section**

The bass line, in combination with the perfect fifth bell ostinato, mainly produce (015) and (016) trichords in the first half of section B. For instance, (016) trichords are found in mm. 11, 15, 18, 19, and 21. In m. 11, the bell ostinato {G4, D5} and the C#5 in the bass form a (016) trichord; in mm. 15, 18, and 21, the bell ostinato forms (016) trichords with the G#4 in the bass, and in m 19, the bell ostinato and the C#1 in the bass form a (016)

trichord. However, these trichords do not repeat regularly to form a pattern. Hence, they do not form any specific *Tonnetz*. Since the voice predominantly moves in stepwise motion in the first half of section B and only in thirds or fifths in the second half, the (014) trichords, which are prominent in the A sections, rarely occur in this section. The voice contains only a (014) trichord melodically in m. 19. The utilization of (015) and (016) trichords shows that minor seconds, minor thirds, and perfect fifths, which are the prominent intervals of the A sections, and tritones are frequently used in the first half of section B.

## **Conclusion of Section B**

Kurtág incorporates many compositional features from the A sections such as the wedge-like figure in the voice, the use of ostinato in the middle staff, the use of word painting for important words, and the use of semitones and perfect fifths. The semitone movements between the bass and voice are significant as they create most of the dissonances between the two parts. This section is also dominated by perfect fifth intervals, which are found in the bell ostinato, the cycle of fifths created with the inclusion of the bass line in the second half of this section, and the voice which outlines the first part of a G major scale as well as G major triad. The semitone, tritone, and perfect fifth are emphasized through the utilization of (015) and (016) trichords in the bass and the bell ostinato. The semitone and the perfect fifth are foreshadowed at the end of section A, m. 9, where the perfect fifths in the bass and the ostinato are composed a semitone apart. In addition to the above recurring features, Kurtág appropriates folk tune elements to add a stronger nostalgic flavor to the piece, procure more frequent note



attacks to create tension for specific words such as “fever”, and emphasize the note G4 as a reference pitch in section B.

### ***Section C: The Re-transition from Section B to Section A2***

Section C comprises a very short section, two measures long. It is composed in three parts: the voice, the Descant and Cantus Firmus paired up in the middle staff (the bell ostinato in section B), and the bass in a similar manner to section B. Section C is sung in a spoken manner and the text is written in third person, indicating that the lines from the section B were the woman’s last words. This section transitions from section B to section A2 by utilizing materials from both. For example, the voice ends in a tritone <F#4, C4>, which has been an important interval in section B. Also, the whole-tone movement in mm. 14-15 becomes the foundation of the plainchant-like voice part in section C. The near whole-tone scale (excluding the G4) in the voice starts and ends on C4 to foreshadow the return of the reference pitch C4 in the A2 section. The Cantus Firmus and the Descant in the middle staff form two pairs of major thirds, {D4, F#4} and {E4, G#4}, which remain a whole tone apart. While the first pair ascends to the second pair, the bass part descends a diminished third (enharmonically a major second) from F3 to D#3. The middle staff {D4, F#4} and the bass note F3 form a (014) trichord, and the middle staff {E4, G#4} and the bass note D#3 form a (015) trichord. Following the plainchant melody in the voice, these two trichords are reminiscent to a wordless “a-men,” and they add some religious color to the end of the C section. The presence of these two frequently used trichords from the A sections aids in creating a smoother transition to the section A2. From the end of section C (the last note of m. 28) to section A2 in the next measure,

the bass note D#3 descends a semitone to D3, the Cantus Firmus E4 ascends a minor third to G4 while the Descant G#4 in the middle staff ascends a whole tone to Bb4. Significant intervals from the A, B, and C sections are utilized here to transition back to section A2.

## **Section A2**

Most of the materials in the A2 section are similar to those in the A1 section, but the A2 section also recapitulates aspects of sections B and C. The Cantus Firmus and Descant are borrowed from the A1 section. The voice focuses on the same reference pitch, G4, as did the folk-tune material in the B section, and the bass line contains some whole tone and plainchant-like materials that are reminiscent of both the C and A1 sections.

Kurtág does not favor exact repetition in his music. Although the Cantus Firmus and Descant have the same contour as in the A1 section, at least one note always remains different from the Descant. This maintains the difference between the two sections. For instance, the contours of the Descant and Cantus Firmus in mm.1 and 29 are the same, but the last two notes of the Descant are slightly different. The bass exemplifies this in mm. 2 and 32. Only two notes happen to be different between these two measures: the first Descant note changes from B4 to Bb4 and the first bass note changes from A#1 to B1. Additionally, some materials are re-employed with variations in different parts. For example, the voice melody <Gb4, F4, E4, Eb4, D4, A4> in m. 3 is partially transposed to the bass line <G2, F#2, F2, Eb2, Ab2> in m. 30 with a similar contour. The first three pitches <G4, A4, B4> of the folk tune in m. 10 are repeated in the voice and the Descant

with rhythmic variations in m. 30. In m. 32, the folk tune is transposed down to <B2, C#2, D#3>.

Besides the use of aggregates as mentioned in section A1, the use of whole-tone elements is also a common characteristic in this movement especially in sections B, C and A2.

They are for instance, found in the bass line of the sections B and A2 and in the voice of sections B and C. In mm. 14-15, the bass is moving in whole tone intervals, and at the end of the piece (mm. 31-32), an incomplete F whole tone collection occurs, missing only G. In mm. 14-15, the voice moves mostly in whole tone intervals and in m. 27-28, the voice melody is based on whole tone elements. The whole tone segment idea probably shows influence from Berg's Violin Concerto. The concerto is subtitled "To the Memory of an Angel (Engel), a reference brought to mind by the name of the deceased woman of this text (Hengl). The last movement of Berg's Violin Concerto quotes a transposed whole tone segment <B, C#, D#, F> from <Bb, C, D, E> in J. S. Bach's chorale *Es ist genug*.<sup>47</sup> Kurtág borrowed the idea and used it explicitly towards the end of this movement and implicitly earlier. The first segment is found in the Descant from mm. 30-31 <G4, A4, B4, Db4>, which is doubled (but slightly delayed) in the voice <G4, A4, B4>; similarly, the Descant in mm. 31-32 has <F#4, G#4, Bb4>, and the bass in mm. 31-32 ends with <A1, B1, C#2, D#2>, ending the whole piece with a complete quote. Following the C section that ends with an "a-men" chord figure, the utilization of this Bach chorale quote in the last section of the piece has added some religious color to the text, which stresses the idea of the deceased woman resting in peace.

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<sup>47</sup> Anthony Pople, "Berg: Violin Concerto," *Music & Letters* 73: 3 (August 1992): 474-75.

## ***Conclusion of Chapter 2***

The A and B sections contain most of Kurtág's common compositional techniques such as the avoidance of exact repetition of materials, the use of ostinato, semitones, thirds, and fifths as the principle intervals, the alternation between major and minor thirds and sixths, the utilization of aggregates, specific pc set classes, wedge-like structures, and references to traditional scales and modes. He employs dissonances or more frequent attacks to emphasize important words in the text. He also employs folk-tunes to create a stronger nostalgic sensibility. Section C is a re-transition back to section A2 and the final section A2 wraps up the piece by recapitulating materials used in section A1, B and C. In addition, religious color is added to the last two sections by using a plainchant-like melody in the voice, ending with a wordless "a-men" chord figure in section C, and procuring quotes from past compositions such as Berg's Violin concerto and J. S. Bach's chorale *Es ist genug* in section A2.

## Chapter 3

### ***Compositional Style***

This chapter treats Kurtág's compositional techniques that have not been discussed in the previous chapter and addresses his use of symbolism, word painting, musical rebuses, and gestures, how he creates a sense of rhythm and stability in the piece, the points of reference in the pitch structure of the movement, and how the climax of the piece is achieved.

### **The Use of Symbolism in Kurtág's Pieces**

Symbolism is a common feature in Kurtág's pieces. For example, in the final movement of his *String Quartet*, he utilizes an overtone chord to symbolize light, which itself represents new values and beauty.<sup>48</sup> Williams identifies some of Kurtág's best known musical symbols which are shown in Figure 20 and include: a) the "purity chord," used at the beginning of the *String quartet* Op.1; b) the melody "virag az ember," ("man is as a flower"), from *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza*, op. 7; and c) the "sin" motive from his *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza*, op. 7.<sup>49</sup> Williams also suggests that other symbols such as the chromatic scale, which is featured in numerous pieces as a structuring motive as well as a simple motive, play significant roles in his pieces. The symbols that Kurtág utilizes sometimes recur, but in each case, they may express a different idea. Sometimes

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<sup>48</sup> Bálint András, Varga, "Music: "It's Not My Ears That Do My Hearing": György Kurtág Interviewed by Bálint András Varga," *The Hungarian Quarterly* 42: 161 (Spring 2001): 130.

<sup>49</sup> Williams, "György Kurtág and the Open Work," 142.

the musical symbols are unstable, and occasionally only a small proportion exactly repeats, as Kurtág dislike reusing identical materials. Williams points out that Kurtág's musical symbols can be compared to Wagner's *Leitmotiven*. Wagner's *Leitmotiven* are usually limited to one particular work and maintain to a degree the stability of the musical motive's established meaning within that work. Kurtág's musical symbols tend to occur across a number of works and may be presented without any clear reference to their origin. It is also possible for a same musical motive to represent different ideas when used in two different works. For example, in the fourth movement of his Op. 28 *Officium breve in memoriam Andreae Szervansky* for string quartet, the harmonic content is created from two doubled-up versions of the "purity" motive, which does not exhibit any relationship to the musical motive that originally appeared in Op. 1. Even though the motives are based on the same harmonic content, the one incorporated in Op. 28 does not represent the idea of "purity" as in Op. 1.<sup>50</sup>

**Figure 20 : The Three Most Common Symbols: "Purity" Motive, "Virág az ember" Motive, "Sin" Motive, Found in Kurtág's Pieces**



**Source:** E. Alan, Williams, "György Kurtág and the Open Work," *The Hungarian Quarterly* 42: 163 (Autumn 2001): 142.

In Kurtág's other pieces, the set class (014) is often used to represent death as manifested in the voice part in *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza*, op. 7, second movement "Death."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>51</sup> Rachel Beckles, Willson, "Kurtág's *The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza*, Op. 7," *Music Analysis*, 22/iii (2003): 324.

Figure 21 shows three pc sets <E4, G4, G#4>, <F4, F#4, A>, and <D5, Eb4, F#4> belonging to the set class (014) in the voice part. In the *Three old Inscriptions* Op. 25, the set class (014) is also an important set class, especially in the voice part. In the second movement (Figure 22), the set class (014) is present in the voice at the beginning in order to strongly symbolize death. For the third movement, Figure 14 in chapter 2 of this thesis demonstrates that the set class (014) is most frequently used to strongly symbolize the theme of this inscription, “death.”

Figure 21: The Use of Pc Set Class (014) in the Voice of Op. 7

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Presto". It consists of a voice part and a piano accompaniment. The voice part has lyrics in Hungarian: "A ha - tő, mint egy tőr a ma - da -", "ral, még - csep el - - - lep". The piano part includes markings for "una corda", "poco rinf.", "tre corde", "una corda", "sempre ppp", and "poco". The tempo is marked "Presto".

Source: Rachel Beckles, Willson, "Kurtág's The Sayings of Peter Bornemisza, Op. 7," *Music Analysis*, 22/iii (2003): 324.

Williams points out that Kurtág's symbols are often rooted in the conventions of music history.<sup>52</sup> Two of the most common musical topics are the "pianto" (weeping or sighing), which consists of a falling slurred minor second or third, and the "chromatic fourth," which comprises a rising fourth or fifth followed by descending semitone movements. According to Monelle, these two elements are often associated with each other. In this composition, they both play integral roles in the A sections. The "sighing" motive and the descending chromatic scale are combined and used in the Cantus Firmus, which is occasionally doubled by the voice. The combination of these two features in the Cantus Firmus aids in establishing a strong and unified mournful mood. Since the voice sometimes doubles the Cantus Firmus, it also contains the "sighing" motive as in mm. 3, 5, and 7. However, they are not always slurred in descending minor seconds because the slurs follow the syllables instead of the two note "sighing motives" in the Cantus Firmus. For example, in m. 3, the voice mostly doubles the Cantus Firmus, but does not adhere to all of its two-note slurs.

The interval of a perfect fifth comprises the fourth important symbol in this piece. It has been associated with death since the early romantic period onward.<sup>53</sup> Other than death, the perfect fifth also conveys a feeling of space and a sense of hollowness. This interval in the two A sections is outlined by the chromatic descent of the Cantus Firmus from G4 to C4. The descending chromatic fifth constitutes a strong symbol of death and depicts a heavy, gloomy feeling. In the B section, the fifth is also outlined melodically, but very differently, by the voice's ascending diatonic scale from G4 to D5, which creates an

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<sup>52</sup> Williams, "György Kurtág and the Open Work," 144.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



innocent and harmless impression, in testimony to the deceased woman. In both sections, the fifth is anchored on and departs from G, reinforcing it as one of the important points of tonal reference of the movement.

To summarize, the symbols Kurtág employs in this composition—the set class (014), the interval of the fourth or fifth outlined by descending semitone movement, the sighing motive composed of falling seconds or thirds, and the perfect fifth—have all been used, either historically or by Kurtág, as symbols for death or mourning.

## **The Use of Word Painting and Musical Rebuses**

In Kurtág's music, a common feature that is closely associated with symbolism is word painting, i.e. the meaning of the text is depicted by the musical sounds. In addition to this vocal compositional technique, Kurtág utilizes musical rebuses, i.e. the meaning of the text is represented in the form of pictures in the musical notation, as in his more recent compositions such as Op. 35 to 37.<sup>54</sup> For instance, in "The Potatoes" from the collection *Einige Sätze aus den Sudelbüchern Georg Christoph Lichtenbergs* Op. 37, all the notes, which are written as semibreves, visually resemble potatoes, and lie in or underneath the stave as if being below the earth. The text reads, "The potatoes are lying there, and are sleeping for their resurrection." At the word "resurrection," the semibreves fittingly rise to the top of the stave, a compositional gesture that is both graphically depictive (as a rebus) and also aurally effective (as word painting) In one of the *intermezzi* from the collection, which is set to the song *Ein einschläfriger Kirchstuhl*, the word "einschläfrig"

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<sup>54</sup> McLay, "Three Recent Works by György Kurtág," 148.

(meaning single bed) evokes connotations of the verb “einschläfern” which means to lull, to sleep, or to drug. To aid in evoking this feeling, the double bass suitably provides hollow and drowsy harmonics to accompany the vocal line. In the *intermezzi*, another setting of the words “The American whom Columbus discovered, made a bad discovery,” two trumpets are placed at a little distance from and on either side of the singer. The notion of seeking and discovering is conveyed by a canon. To depict the actual discovery, the trumpets play alternately in unison with the singer, whilst the unfortunate aspect of the discovery for the Native American is shown in a fragmenting texture which contains more silence than notes.<sup>55</sup> Musical rebuses such as the petal-like duration signs to the words “Virág za ember” in his Op. 7 also occur. Besides these, Kurtág employs scales for pictorial function as in his sixth song from the third movement of *Messages*, Op. 17, where he utilizes descending scales to portray the fluttering of autumn leaves.<sup>56</sup> The following paragraphs will discuss where Kurtág uses word painting or musical rebuses in this Op. 25 third movement.

In the A1 section, only word painting is employed. Whenever the text is related to rest or death, the voice descends. For example, in m. 3, the voice descends chromatically while the word “rest” comprises part of the text “Here rest in God,” and in m. 5, the voice descends chromatically concurrent with the phrase “died in.” In m. 3, the voice rises a perfect fifth with the word “God,” suggesting that peace is found with God in heaven by the completion of a D major triad as outlined by the descending line and the perfect fifth.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>56</sup> McLay, “The music of György Kurtág 1959-1980,” 87.

The B section contains additional word painting and some musical rebuses. For this entire section, the {G, D} funeral bell ostinato helps establish a simple and religious atmosphere, and also an imposing solemnity and cool distance. Lentsner notes, in connection with the chain of perfect fifths in Kurtág's Op. 19, "The openness of fifths creates a cold sensation."<sup>57</sup> In the Op. 25 third movement, mm. 10-13, the melody moves in a simple folk-like diatonic ascending scale from G4 to D5 along with simple accompaniment in the piano so as to imply an innocent mood when the voice sings, "In the loveliest bloom of my recent life." In mm. 14 and 15 where the text says, "the fever devoured me," the voice and bass wander up and down in semitones and whole tones with more frequent attacks so as to depict aurally (word painting) and visually (musical rebus as shown on the music), the action of the woman tumbling back and forth due to her dizziness. In m. 18, the words "im Lenze" (meaning in springtime, but more specifically referring to Lent in the Church calendar) are symbolized by an ascending major third (<A4, C#5>, already foreshadowed in mm. 10-11 by the piano left hand part) supported by an ascending bass line. In m. 22, the ostinato is joined by the bass line creating a solemn descending chain of fifths, which stretches downwards by adding one bass note per measure from mm. 23-27, representing the deceased woman slowly descending into the cold grave and building tension towards the long fermata at the end of the section. As the voice reaches the word "stil-le," it sings G4 for both syllables, which effectively conveys the sense of staying still, silence, calmness, and a sense of closure for this section as well; these two G4 open note heads demonstrate an example of

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<sup>57</sup> Dina Lentsner, "The Structure of What is Beyond the Words: Musico-Poetic Analysis of the Fragment from "Scenes from a Novel," Op. 19 by György Kurtág," *Studia Musicologica-Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43:3-4 (2002): 328.

musical rebus which pictorially portrays a woman lying still in the grave. In addition, feeling of resolution is also supported by the pianissimo dynamic level and the style determined by the term “poco piu sostenuto” in mm. 23-26.

In m. 30 of the A2 section, while the text mentions resting in peace, the melody recapitulates most of the G major scale from the beginning of the B section to depict a peaceful and resting atmosphere, and to symbolize the woman’s rising to heaven in peace: <B4, B4, D5, G4, A4, B4>.

## The Use of Gestures

Besides word painting and music rebuses, gestures are prominent in Kurtág’s pieces. Barazzoni mentions that Kurtág employs sudden dynamic interruptions, bright-colored figures, lacerated timbres, and torn clustered harmonics to achieve a theatrical effect in his compositions.<sup>58</sup> An example of sudden dynamic interruption is found in m. 20 of the Op. 25 third movement, in which a crescendo gradually grows louder followed immediately by a subito pppp chord in m. 22. The gesture of employing a sudden drop in dynamic level creates astonishment for the audience. The sudden change of dynamics draws attention to the climax in m. 21 and increases its effectiveness because as the tension builds up, the loudest chord would be expected at the point of arrival in m. 22. Instead, Kurtág unexpectedly presents a subito pppp chord. In addition to employing sudden dynamic interruptions, Kurtág utilizes three of his common gestures: a sudden

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<sup>58</sup> Beatrice Barazzoni, “Kurtág’s Music: The Spectacle of Nature, the Breath of History—from op. 7 to 27,” *Studia Musicologica-Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43:3-4 (2002): 255.

change of register, the gesture of hands crossing, and the employment of different vocal techniques in Op. 25.

One of his favorite types of gestures consists of a sudden switch from a high register to a low register. This occurs in Op. 7 *Virág az ember*, Op. 13 *Hommage à Mihály András*, and *Aus der Ferne*, no. 3 of *Tre Pezzi* for violin and piano Op. 14e. Kurtág often employs register shifts or octave displacements to create tension in his music. In *Aus der Ferne*, no. 3, the chromatic scale in the accompaniment is displaced into an extreme register. A similar instance occurs in the second movement of Op. 25 (see Figure 22). The gestures in the accompaniment consist of octave displacements which create a tense and agitated mood along with the fast tempo and loud dynamics in both voice and piano. In m. 19 of the third movement, the piano chord (marked *sf*) is scored with the highest note F#5 in the bass line. The chord then abruptly switches to the lowest register C# on the piano (C#1). This dramatic move creates tension suggestive of the tragedy of the young woman's sudden and early death. The shift of register also implies the action of the female dying by falling to the ground and being buried in the cold grave.

Figure 22: The First Two Lines of the Second Movement of Op. 25

**Molto agitato**

**poco sost.**

Source: *Three Old Inscriptions for voice and piano Op. 25*. Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest editions: 9.

Kurtág also frequently uses the gesture of hands crossing in many of his compositions, such as in Op. 7. The hand-crossing gesture is often written in the same clef, creating a visual illusion because the gesture appears to be moving down on the page but the music actually moves up aurally (or vice versa). For instance, in mm. 9 and 13 of the third movement of Op. 25, the left hand E5 appears visually lower than the right hand {G4, D5} ostinato but it is higher than the ostinato aurally, because they are written in the same clef. When the pianist performs this gesture, the movement of the hands creates an image to suggest that the female is dancing around while singing the phrase, “In the loveliest bloom of my young life.” In the first movement, the piano accompaniment consists mainly of hand crossings, with sudden switches of register throughout. These

gestures create tension in the performance because it is technically difficult for the performer to complete frequent register shifts and hand-crossing movements. Figure 23 displays the first two lines of the first movement, showing that it contains the same illusion as the example in the third movement. At the beginning of the first movement, the left hand plays a D#4 moving down to a C#4 in the right hand which later shifts to the F#4 in the left hand and subsequently moves up to the G#4 in the right hand. Visually, the D# looks like it is moving up to the C#4 and then down to the F#4, but because they are both written in the same clef, an opposite aural effect is created. We actually hear that the D#4 goes down to C#4 and then back up to F#4.

Figure 23: The First Two Lines of the First Movement of Op. 25

KURTÁG György Op. 25

*Poco vivace*

(theu - led el kel) (y - re -

*pppp, lontano*

*Esitando pppp, lontano*

theu kel) Wij - rag ... theu - led ...

Source: *Three Old Inscriptions for voice and piano Op. 25*. Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest editions: 6.

Kurtág frequently employs gestures that involve different types of vocal techniques. He utilizes extreme articulation of the voice to convey the meaning of the text for words such

as “whispering,” “crying,” and “mewing” in Op. 17. These represent expressive extremes of vocality which contain theatrical gestures in themselves.<sup>59</sup> In the second movement of Op. 25, the voice collapses to a lower part of the soprano range to express the anger in the text. The text is sung quickly with stressed notes, loud dynamics, and very forceful gestures most of the time. These elements, along with the octave displacements in the accompaniment, depict the angry and agitated mood quite convincingly. The A sections of the third movement are predominantly sung in a very sustained and soft dynamic as if someone is weeping for the deceased female. In the C section, to suit the narrative style and in order to create a religious sentiment, the voice sings the plainchant-like melody in a “gesprochen” (meaning spoken) manner when the narrator says, “These were here last words.”

### **Sense of Rhythm and Meter and Establishing Stability in the Piece**

According to McLay, Kurtág employs four main techniques for achieving greater stability in contrast with the more fluctuating rhythmic types: the use of obvious regular meters, the creation of passages which culminate in a feeling of cadence, the utilization of ostinato, and the use of relatively even durations without regular meter.<sup>60</sup> The last two techniques are found in the third movement of Op. 25.

Some twentieth-century music is very traditional, using regular meters with time signatures or some clear distinction between strong and weak beats. Other music, such as Kurtág’s is less traditional because it relies predominantly on structural downbeats in

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 100.



order to achieve a sense of stability. For example, in the first movement of Kurtág's *String quartet* Op. 1, the ear will assign the role of downbeat to the start of each new cell so that there appears to be a single succession of downbeats. Varying the lengths of each cell creates a feeling of irregularity and "pulselessness."<sup>61</sup>

Kurtág employs ostinato technique in the third movement of Op. 25. The ostinato creates structural downbeats and rhythmic stability since repetition focuses the attention on a definite point of departure or point of rest. The regularity of its appearance also enhances the metrical regularity of the composition.<sup>62</sup> In the A sections, Kurtág composes a measure-long ostinato from G4 to C4 in the Cantus Firmus so as to form structural downbeats which are emphasized by the two-note slur articulations, creating a subdivision of four beats per measure. In section B, the perfect fifth bell ostinato created by the G4 and D5 aids in maintaining a sense of regular beat. It is first scored as one breve note per measure and then changes into two whole notes per measure as the music progresses to m. 16. The more frequent attacks create a sense of faster tempo which increases the tension towards the climax at mm. 19-21. Towards mm. 25-26, a decrease in tempo is created by replacing the first ostinato downbeats with rests.

Additionally, in order to achieve a sense of rhythmic stability, Kurtág utilizes relatively even durations without a regular meter. In the A sections, this regularity is achieved by employing four regular open note heads in the Descant in each measure. In the B section, as the tempo becomes livelier, the downbeat changes to two open note heads with two

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 100.

basic downbeats formed by the piano accompaniment. In section C, the piano accompaniment creates three downbeats with a breve note and an open note head, making a transition back to the A2 section. Kurtág employs a system of varied note heads and fermata signs to indicate varying approximate lengths so as to produce a texture which is rhythmically simple yet relatively unpredictable. Since the note lengths and pause lengths are not specified, this allows the performer to shape a phrase or hold a certain pause *ad libitum*.

### **Tonal Centers, Cadences, and Closure**

The ideas of maintaining a tonal center and creating closure are fundamental to music, even with some twentieth-century composers.<sup>63</sup> Although they avoid the tonal system, they seek to cast their music in the form of complete and self-contained works. For example, in many of Bartók's works, there would be a descent to a particular note which functions as a tonal centre and connotes the force of an arrival analogous to a perfect cadence. Since Kurtág refers to Bartók as one of his influences, some of Kurtág's works reveal instances of this same desire to emphasize certain referential pitches and create closure for musical phrases.<sup>64</sup>

Kurtág produces tonal levels in several ways. Some of his works manifest a sense of home or referential pitches as exhibited in the collection "The potatoes" and "Touropa" from the collection *Einige Sätze aus den Sudelbüchern Georg Christoph Lichtenbergs*

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<sup>63</sup> Williams, "György Kurtág and the Open Work," 138.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

Op. 37.<sup>65</sup> In other pieces, such as Op. 30a, Kurtág produces tonal levels by means of pitch repetition. He also composes cadence-like closure in his pieces, most of the time involving an intervallic constellation of a fifth and a tritone (e.g. <Bb, E, F> = (016)). The appearance of this set can be interpreted as a reference to Bartok's Violin Concerto.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, Kurtág creates closure for musical phrases or sections by recapitulating the same materials which create a sense of unification. For example, in *Aus de Ferne*, no. 3 of *Tre Pezzi* for violin and piano, the opening materials are recapitulated at the end to represent the end of the previous section as well as the start of a new section. The recapitulation also creates a sense of unification and closure for the entire piece.

Kurtág also uses specific intervals to represent closure. For instance, Hohmaier concludes, after examining the sketchbook 'q' for *Bornemisze* op. 7, that a falling minor second conveys a strong sense of closure for Kurtág.<sup>67</sup>

Some of these characteristics can also be found in the third movement of Op. 25. The following sections manifest how Kurtág creates referential pitches and pitch classes, musical phrase closure, cadence-like closure, and sectional closure.

### **Section A1**

In the A1 section, C4 and G4 are two important referential pitches, which are emphasized in different parts in this section. The Cantus Firmus ostinato descends from G4 to C4

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<sup>65</sup> McLay, "Three Recent Works by György Kurtág," 148.

<sup>66</sup> Hohmaier, "Mutual Roots of Musical Thinkings," 231.

<sup>67</sup> Hohmaier, "Analysis—Play—Composition," 41.

repeatedly in every measure creating a strong sense of returning to C and outlining the C major-minor triad. The first Descant note (Bb4 or B4) is always set over the Cantus Firmus pitch G4, forming an alternation between {G4, Bb4} and {G4, B4} to emphasize the G major or minor thirds in each measure. The voice mainly emphasizes C4 and sometimes D4 in this section. In m. 9, the voice concludes on <E4, C4> which suggests the melody is ending on a C major harmony. Just two measures earlier, the voice doubles the Cantus Firmus by descending from G4 to C4 in m. 7 which further emphasizes C. The pitch D4 is slightly emphasized in mm. 3 and 6 where the D major triad is suggested and outlined by the D4 rising to A4. The bass does not emphasize any specific note with the exception of the Ab towards the end of the section in mm. 8 and 9. Coincidentally, the Descant and the voice also end on Ab4 in m. 8, so as to foreshadow the G#4 that is predominant in the bass line in the next section. In conclusion, the main referential pitches of this section are C4 and G4. Arguably, in this section G4 is the more strongly referential of the two pitch classes, because it is on the down beat of each measure in the Cantus Firmus and it is always in consonance with the Descant. Although C4 sometimes forms consonances with the Descant or the voice, it is always dissonant with another part, mostly with the bass part. In addition, after the cadence of C4 at the end of this section, the voice and Cantus Firmus immediately moves to G4 in the next section. The pitch Ab4, emphasized in the bass towards the end of the section, is used to foreshadow one of the referential pitches in the next section.

Kurtág creates closure in section A1 in several ways. He does so through utilizing silence by ending the prelude in m. 2 and the section A1 with long rests. Similar to Op. 30a,

Kurtág also composes a cadence-like phrase closure by using an intervallic constellation of a fifth and a tritone, which forms a set of class (016). For instance, in m. 6, closure is achieved when the voice sings <D4, A4, G#4> while the piano accompaniment remains silent. In addition to this, the recapitulation of the m. 3 Descant and Cantus Firmus in m. 7 signify that m. 6 brought the end of the previous phrase. M. 7 brings a new beginning which contains the same materials as the beginning to conclude section A1. The end of the section A1 (m. 9) presents an additional example in which two pairs of harmonic perfect fifths in the piano accompaniment form a (016) trichord {Ab4, D5, Eb5} so as to create a sense of sectional closure. Coincidentally, the perfect fifths contain and foreshadow the two prominent referential pitches of the next section, G4 and Ab4. In addition, Kurtág creates a stronger sense of closure by using falling minor seconds in the Cantus Firmus and ending the voice with the pitch C4, which constitutes the most prominent pitch in section A1.

### **Section B**

In section B, the referential pitches change slightly. The focus shifts to pitch class C#, G4, and G#4 where G4 and G#4 (enharmonically Ab4) are foreshadowed by the last chord of the A1 section. The note G4 becomes the most prominent because it is present in the bell ostinato throughout the entire section. Also, in mm. 10-13, the folk tune sung by the voice is based on the first five notes of the G diatonic scale. In addition, the voice ends on a repeated G4 in m. 26 and the piano accompaniment concludes with a chord containing G4 as the top note in m. 27 at the end of the section. The bass part remains slightly different from the other three parts because it emphasizes pitch class C# and pitch

G#4. The two phrases in mm. 14-15 and 16-17 start with pitch class C# and end with G#4. These notes are emphasized in m. 21 with accents. Comparatively, the pitch class C# (enharmonically Db) is more prominent than G#4 in the bass line. For instance, in m. 19, the C#1 draws special attention to itself because it constitutes the lowest note of the entire movement and is presented with a huge register shift from the previous accented chord. Additionally, pitch class C# functions as the last note of the cycle of fifths as well as the entire section.

In the B section, Kurtág creates phrase closure in the voice melody by forming the (016) trichord at the end of each phrase in the piano accompaniment as exemplified in m. 11 {G4, C#5, D5} = (016) trichord, and mm. 15, 18, and 21 {D, G, G#} = (016) trichord. So as to announce the end of the section, Kurtág utilizes several ways to create closure. He does so by hinting the return of the referential pitch, C4, of section C and A2. For example, at the end of m. 22, C4 is added to the G4 and D5 bell ostinato and remains until the end of the section in m. 27. Furthermore, the voice concludes the section on the most prominent referential pitch, G4, in m. 26. In addition, Kurtág creates closure by building chords with Ab moving to Db in mm. 26-27 in order to create a sense of a perfect (V-I) cadence.

### **Section C**

The C section transitions between the B section and the A2 section. The note C4 is emphasized at the beginning and the end of the voice part in order to prepare the return of

this prominent note in the next section. To create a cadential feeling, the piano accompaniment plays an “a-men” chord figure.

## **Section A2**

This section's emphasized referential pitches are similar to those in section A1. The Cantus Firmus and Descant focus on the same notes (C4 and G4) as section A1 whereas the voice emphasizes the G diatonic scale from section B. Closure is created by recapitulating materials from the previous sections. In this piece, the last measures of the prelude (m. 2) and the postlude (m. 32) are almost identical except that first notes in the bass and the Descant are inverted. In m. 2, B4 is scored as the first note in the Descant, and A#1 is scored in the bass. In m. 32, Bb4 (enharmonically A#) sounds as the first note in the Descant, while the bass plays B1. It is typical in traditional theory to recapitulate with the same materials before the end of a piece. Since Kurtág seldom reuses or repeats the exact same materials in his pieces, the recapitulation manifests the significance of the two phrase endings. In section A2, each individual part ends with the varied Bach chorale quote (in a canonic manner) which aids in creating a unified ending to the whole movement. The first segment commences in the Descant which is followed by the voice and which ends with the bass part. To create an unfinished, incomplete, and a hanging feeling so as to represent the sudden passing away of the young woman, two of the most prominent notes of this movement (C and C#), are omitted in the Cantus Firmus in the last measure. This resembles the end of the prelude (m. 2) in section A1. The falling minor seconds in the Cantus Firmus are present in the same manner as in section A1 which symbolizes a strong sense of closure in Kurtág's music. Lastly, the Cantus Firmus

and the bass are composed in contrary motion which further strengthens the sense of closure.

In conclusion, different parts contain different referential pitches throughout the movement. The voice, Cantus Firmus, and the Descant move from focusing on C4 and G4 in section A1 to focusing on G4, and D5 in section B, and reverting to C4 and G4 in section A2. This implies the traditional harmonic progression: tonic (C, G), dominant (G, D), and tonic progression (I-V-I). The bass part emphasizes Ab4 (enharmonically G#4) in section A1, pitch class C# and the pitch G#4 in section B, and briefly returns to G#4 in section A2. This suggests another traditional harmonic progression: tonic (G#), subdominant (C#), and tonic progression (I-IV-I). The different referential pitches form relationships emphasizing some featured intervals or trichords in this movement. For instance, in section A1, the three most prominent pitches (C4, G#4, and G4) form a (015) trichord which happens to be one of the most frequently used class types in this movement (see Figure 14). In section B, the set of referential pitches in the top three parts (D, G) and the bass (C#, G#) generate semitone relationships. Also, the two pairs of perfect fifths form tritone intervals (D, G#) and (C#, G). Semitones and tritones comprise two of the most important intervals in this movement.

## **Climax of the Piece**

The climax of the movement occurs in the B section, mm. 19-21. The text portrays the young woman buried in a cold grave. The climax is achieved by the following: the first bass chord in m. 19 is approached by an ascending bass line which builds tension which



culminates in a widely spaced *sforzando* chord. Following this chord, a sudden register change ensues in the bass line from the highest note F# 5 to the lowest note C#1. Second, a crescendo builds to m. 21 which immediately is followed by a sudden pppp, so as to create a dramatic surprise since listeners would expect to hear the loudest chord at the arrival point in m.22. This effect draws attention to the unexpected chord in m. 22. Third, in mm. 20 and 21, the bass produces chords which increase the dynamics and create a denser texture rather than single notes. Finally, a short rest in the voice part, coincident with the *sforzando* chord in the piano, dramatizes the ensuing declamation of the climactic words, “ins kühle Grab hinaus.”

## Conclusion

This thesis demonstrates how *The Three Old Inscriptions* Op. 25 comprise an outstanding piece that exhibits Kurtág's compositional approach in multiple aspects, that demonstrate his having been influenced through Bartók and Webern, and shows his mastery of compositional technique incorporating vocal music. The thesis indicates how Kurtág has syncretized past traditional compositional elements with modern compositional techniques, and how he further modifies and elaborates them to create his own unique musical style.

Kurtág demonstrates this syncretization by his use of Cantus Firmus and Descant melody, ostinatos, folk-tune melody, a Hungarian-related text with a folk-tune melody to create a strong nationalistic sense, chant-like melody and chords to refer to the past, and prevalent intervals such as seconds and tritones (common in contemporary music), thirds and fifths (common in traditional music). He also employs musical quotes from composers such as J. S. Bach and Berg, medieval text settings employing syllabic renderings for most of the text and melismatic ones for important words, different ways to achieve a sense of rhythm or meter to establish the stability in the piece, and he constructs a presence of tonal reference and closure for different sections. In addition, he borrows compositional techniques such as wedge-like figures from Webern and Bartók, and the alternation of major and minor thirds from Bartók. Further to this, Kurtág creates new compositional expressions such as the use of notation and symbols created by him to project non-metric experiences of musical rhythm and time. Most importantly, Kurtág brings contemporary vocal music to a new level through his use of symbolism, word painting, musical rebuses,

and gestures. He employs different symbols, which can be compared to Wagner's *Leitmotiven*, such as pc set class (014), descending chromatic movements, and perfect fifths to represent the main theme of "death." In his word painting, he procures dissonances to create tension and to bring attention to important words. He also adds musical rebuses to his music to make the word painting more innovative and interesting. He employs gestures which utilize an abrupt switch of register and the varied vocal techniques to manifest a desired mood or feeling. Although *The Three Old Inscriptions*, Op. 25, have not yet received close attention from music theorists, the present study shows how their rich musical content and concentrated format demonstrate Kurtág's wide-ranging and effective compositional style.

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