

BETWEEN NONSENSE AND SILENCE. HÖLDERLIN IN THE WORKS OF GYÖRGY LIGETI AND GYÖRGY KURTÁG

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ABSTRACT

The friendship between György Kurtág and György Ligeti is reflected in their musical dialogues and inter-artistic communications, as well as in the essays they dedicated to each other, which are of great testimonial value in the context of world music history. In the Hungarian musical landscape, the two personalities appear as two contrasting characters. "I have followed Ligeti all my life without ever imitating him"¹, confesses Kurtág. Although they shared similar interests (composing musical works based on historical tradition, placing the focus on language, musical allusions and inter-artistic dialogues), they had radically different aesthetic views. The approach to Friedrich Hölderlin's poems in Ligeti's *Three Fantasies after Friedrich Hölderlin* and in Kurtág's *Hölderlin-Gesänge*, Op. 35 offers a parallel perspective of their respective *ars poetica*.

Keywords: Ligeti, Kurtág, Hölderlin, parataxis

An exploration into the reception of Friedrich Hölderlin's poetry

The reception of Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843), a contemporary of Beethoven, Schiller and Hegel, had a sinuous history, due, on the one hand, to the poet's image as a "misunderstood genius" who ended up living in seclusion and struggling with schizophrenia for thirty-six years, and, on the other hand, to the high level of abstraction that his works engage and which therefore makes them quite difficult to decipher. Hölderlin's affinity with the Greek Antiquity and with Reformed theology, along with his sympathy for the French Revolution, often serves as the semantic ground for the poetic images inspired by nature.

¹ György Kurtág, *Three Interviews and Ligeti Hommages*, ed. Bálint András Varga, University of Rochester Press, 2009, p. 155.

The problematisation of language, the revival of literary aphorism after the First World War through the reconsideration of writers such as Karl Kraus, Franz Kafka or Robert Musil, the essentialization of language as a deliberate, conscious, even necessary act, have brought Hölderlin's oeuvre back to the literary and philosophical circles, not as a symptom of a degrading schizophrenia, but as a work in which fragmentation was replaced with a more powerful means of expression, as a result of the disintegration of language – silence.¹

During the Second World War, Hölderlin was brought back into the spotlight, though in an entirely different interpretation. Hölderlin's hymns of his *Vaterland* (motherland) became national emblems of the National Socialist Regime², while after the war, his rebellious spirit (he was excommunicated from the clerical circle) led Hölderlin to be associated with the revolutionary spirit.³ The one who rehabilitated Hölderlin's name in the intellectual circle after the Second World War was the aesthetician and philosopher Theodor Wiesegrund Adorno, in his analysis *Parataxis: on Hölderlin's Late Poetry*.⁴ The parallels drawn by Adorno and later by Pierre Bertaux between Hölderlin's poetry and music led to the popularization of Hölderlin's works among the Darmstadt circle of composers.

In his literary analysis, Adorno, who famously described Hölderlin as the “master of the intermittent linguistic gesture”⁵, deals with the construction of the poetic form, which he associates with the musical form: “an articulation in terms of movements, of discrete contrasting units within a unity. A subcutaneous form, a form literally composed as in music, took shape within Hölderlin beneath the architectonic form to which he deliberately submitted.”⁶ Thus, Adorno establishes the discursive-associative character of Hölderlin's poetic form. Later, Bertaux associated the discrete, fragmentary structure of Hölderlin's poems with Webern's music. Bertaux goes even further with the comparison, finding another common denominator between Hölderlin and Webern's music: silence, quietude.

A new turn in the reception of Hölderlin's poetry came in 1975, with the publication of a critical edition of his works by Dietrich Eberhard Sattler, a self-taught enthusiast who, combining his devotion to Hölderlin's poetry with his talent as a visual artist, brought Hölderlin's poems back to life, starting from the reinterpretation of the primary sources. Sattler's edition differs from Friedrich Beißner's edition in that it takes an artistic approach, whereby the autograph-manuscripts are perceived as an oeuvre in its own right, in which Sattler discovers the often unfulfilled creative intention, without trying to finish the incomplete poems. At times, the elliptical character of Hölderlin's

¹ Juliana Hodkinson, “Aphorisms, fragments and paratactic synthesis: Hölderlin references and compositional style in György Kurtág's...quasi una fantasia...”, in: *Musik&Forskning* 29, Copenhagen, 2004, p. 28.

² The Ministry of Culture even published a special volume of Hölderlin's hymns, dedicated to the soldiers at the front, under the title *Vaterländische Gesänge* [Patriotic Songs].

³ Pierre Bertaux, *Hölderlin und die Französische Revolution*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1969.

⁴ The study was presented at the Hölderlin Society in Berlin in 1963, and was published in *Die Neue Rundschau*, Issue 75/1, pp. 15-46, in the following year.

⁵ Theodor Wiesegrund Adorno, *Parataxis. On Hölderlin's Late Poetry*, in: *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, translation by Shierry Weber Nicholsen, p. 119.

⁶ In: Theodor Wiesegrund Adorno, *Parataxis. On Hölderlin's Late Poetry*, in: *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, translation by Shierry Weber Nicholsen, p. 130.

poetry seems to be due to a faulty decoding of the manuscript, while at others it illustrates the gaps left unfilled on the page, leaving room for multiple interpretations.

Three Fantasies after Hölderlin by György Ligeti

As an outstanding representative of post-war avant-garde whose spiritual core was embodied by the Darmstadt School, Ligeti followed the trends emanating from the compositional elite. His approach differs from that of other composers of his generation in that he constantly and productively criticized the innovative elements and never stopped pursuing his own concerns.

Composed in 1982, the cycle *Three Fantasies after Friedrich Hölderlin* is a synthesis in which compositional innovations, the imitative polyphonic texture (which, in his larger-scale works, led to micropolyphony) and the *meccanico* style are used to bring expressiveness to the literary text. “The three fantasies after Friedrich Hölderlin are emotional, «onomatopoetic», overwrought, 16-voiced pieces (not micropolyphonic!)”¹ – is Ligeti’s brief description of the cycle, in which he emphasizes the close relationship between music and the literary text.

The pieces are based on three poems by Hölderlin (*Hälfte des Lebens*, *Wenn aus der Ferne...* and *Abendphantasie*), whose literary texts are not imported in their entirety, but rather selectively, often to achieve a higher degree of generality of the poetic idea. If in the first piece (*Hälfte des Lebens*) Ligeti eliminates only two lines, in the second piece (*Wenn aus der Ferne...*) he uses a fragmentary version of the text, which he obtains by extracting only a few key moments from the considerable length of the poem, in order to preserve the general atmosphere of love separation. The most drastic elimination occurs in the third piece, *Abendphantasie*, where Ligeti eliminates the first half of the poem, in which Hölderlin presents the social life of the peasants and sailors and the difficult integration of the lyrical self into the everyday bustle, but keeps the stanzas that create the image of an idyllic evening in the midst of nature and of the estranged lyrical self, embarked on its quest for the ideal, which fades away like a dream.

In the first part of *Hälfte des Lebens*, Ligeti eliminates two stanzas, out of aesthetic reasons. These two stanzas represent the two “halves of life”, two antithetical halves, both in terms of content (the vivid, colourful image of nature, as opposed to the inert, monochrome landscape) and in terms of the perspective of the lyrical self (the contemplative distance in the first stanza is suddenly turned into rhetorical, despondent questions). The eliminated lines are from the end of the first stanza and from the beginning of the second one, before the climax of the poem.

Hälfte des Lebens

Mit gelben Birnen hängen
Und voll mit wilden Rosen
Das Land in den See,

The Middle of Life

With its yellow pears
And wild roses, the shore
Hangs into the lake.

¹ <http://www.allmusic.com/composition/drei-phantasien-nach-friedrich-h%C3%B6lderlin-for-16-voices-mc0002422437> (April 25, 2016).

Ihr holden Schwäne, Und trunken von Küssen (Tunkt ihr das Haupt Ins heilignüchterne Wasser.)	You gracious swans Drunken with kisses (You deep your heads Into the holy sobering water.)
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Weh mir, wo nehm' ich, wenn Es Winter ist, die Blumen, und wo Den Sonnenschein, Und Schatten der Erde? Die Mauern stehn Sprachlos und kalt, im Winde Klirren die Fahnen.	Oh, woe is me, Where do I find, Flowers, come winter, And the sunlight And shadows of Earth? Walls stand there Voiceless and cold, in the wind. Weathervanes clatter.
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Beyond the rhetorical perspective in which the musical moment in the climax of the poem ("Oh, woe is me!") has no "recoil" in the absence of the two verses, we emphasize the elimination of a typical Hölderlin phrase: *heilignüchterne Wasser* ("holy sobering water"). In terms of poetic dramaturgy, this phrase serves to obfuscate the semantic substratum intended by Hölderlin – language, symbolized by the swans, bathes in sacred waters. The image of living nature (colours, water, land, swans) is contrasted with the still image of winter. But even more dissonant is the position of the poetic self in the two scenes. If in the first stanza, nature is admired from afar in all its splendour, in the second stanza, the absence of life and the chromatic monotony are displayed from the disheartening perspective of the lyrical self. According to Adorno's analysis, this poem is relevant for the parataxis technique – a literary technique of associative juxtaposition. In this case, parataxis is used at micro structure level: the first stanza is in paratactic relation to the second stanza, as there is no transition point from the descriptive, impersonal scene in the first stanza, to the sudden, despondent appearance of the poetic self, in the second stanza. In this construction, Adorno remarks on the "anticlassicistic quality, its rebellion against harmony. What is lined up in sequence, unconnected, is as harsh as it is flowing. The mediation is set within what is mediated instead of bridging it. [...] an inherent need for its opposite."¹

Interpretive excursus. Friedrich Hölderlin and Paul Celan

The parallel drawn by the Germanic philologist Rolf Stelbmann between Hölderlin's *Hälfte des Lebens* and Celan's *Tübingen, Jänner* reveals consistencies of form, but also terminological correspondences, like a versified interpretation of Hölderlin's poem, by Paul Celan. The parallel between the two poems begins already in the title: the city of Tübingen, where Hölderlin spent his self-imposed exile in the house of the carpenter Ernst Zimmer, on the Neckar River; and *Jänner*, the popular form for January, alluding to the winter scene in the poem *Hälfte des Lebens*. In Celan's poem, the parallels with Hölderlin continue with the word "Hölderlintürme" and even with quotations from

¹ In: Theodor Wieselgrund Adorno, *Parataxis. On Hölderlin's Late Poetry*, in: *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, translation by Shierry Weber Nichol森, p. 133.

Hölderlin. The two excerpts from Celan's poem – “ein / Rätselist Rein- / entsprungenes” and “Pallaksch. Pallaksch” – are two direct references to the German poet. The former quotation comes from the poem *Der Rhein*, a hymn to the Rhine, where the Romantic literary style is replete with images. The latter one, placed by Celan as a motto, between brackets, at the end of the poem, creates the image of an already suffering Hölderlin, who, in his loneliness, assigns meanings to non-existent words.

		Paul Celan: <i>Tübingen,</i> <i>Jänner</i>
Käme,		
käme ein Mensch,		Zur Blindheit über-
käme ein Mensch zur Welt, heute,		redete Augen.
	mit	Ihre – »ein
dem Lichtbart der		Rätsel ist Rein-
Patriarchen: er dürfte,		entsprungenes« –, ihre
spräche er von dieser		Erinnerung an
Zeit, er		schwimmende
dürfte		Hölderlintürme,
nur lallen und lallen		möven-
immer-, immer-		umschwirrt.
zuzu.		
(»Pallaksch. Pallaksch«)		Besuche ertrunkener
		Schreiner bei
		diesen
		tauchenden Worten:

Starting from the semantic analogy, Rolf Stelbmann's analysis approaches the two poems from the perspective of language. The image of the still walls, “voiceless and cold”, set in paratactic relation to the flags fluttering in the wind, is transposed into Celan's poem, whose language undergoes a process of poetic dismemberment through initially rhetorical and later mechanical repetitions that lead up to the climax, *Pallaksch. Pallaksch*¹. The last line, consisting of the repetition of the word *Pallaksch*, a word invented by Hölderlin during his period of madness and whose meaning has remained unknown to this day, is placed between brackets, as a motto for the entire poem, which, ultimately, reinforces the idea expressed by Hölderlin in a letter to Susette Gontard, according to which language, as a means of communication, is “ein Großes Überfluss” (“a great superfluity”).² The two perspectives of the language illustrated in Hölderlin's poem – “silent”, “voiceless” words on the one hand, and frivolous, vulnerable words, fluttering in the wind on the other, are described by Paul W. Maloney as “a sinister parody of

¹*Pallaksch* is a word invented by Hölderlin during his period of madness, whose meaning has still not been decoded. After leaving the asylum, Hölderlin spent the rest of his life (from 1807 until 1843) in the house of the carpenter Ernst Friedrich Zimmer, later called Hölderlin's Tower.

² Roman Jakobson, *Selected Writings. Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry*, volume III, Mouton, Haga, Paris, New York, 1981, p. 437.

language”, which Celan transposed into a concrete example, from rhetoric to nonsense.¹

Both the two poets and Ligeti indulged in the pleasure of exploring the phonetic substrata of language.² The *Three Fantasies after Friedrich Hölderlin* are written in a dense counterpoint, punctuating the key moments of the text. In the first piece, the music begins in double canon, from the upper voices of the choir to the lower ones. As in the Renaissance madrigal, each new verse continues with another melodic line, followed by the adjacent voices in canon. A small caesura occurs upon the arrival of the swans, *Ihr holden Schwäne (You, gracious swans)* – Ligeti may have used this caesura to draw attention to the symbol of the swan, which in Hölderlin's poems is associated with language. Here, the contrapuntal texture is resumed in *leggiere*, suggesting the graceful movement of the swan, starting this time from the alto voices to the soprano, and mounting to a climax *fff tutta la forza* until the end of the first stanza. *Wie ein Schrei, jedoch in genauer Tonhöhe (Like a scream, but with precise pitches)*. Ligeti's omission of the last two verses from the first stanza could serve him to maintain the abundant metaphor *Und trinken von Küssen (And drunken with kisses)*, as a culminating point between the two stanzas. But for Hölderlin, these two lines are important in the dramaturgy of the poem, through the appearance of the expression *heilig-nüchterne Wasser (holy sobering water)*: the symbol of the swan in Hölderlin's poems, language bathing in holy water, in an ancestral, mythical, impenetrable realm is, therefore, set aside by Ligeti. Could this omission be an act of desacralization of language?

If in the first stanza, the musical texture is conceived as a continuous contrapuntal imitation of a few phrases from the verses, mostly in double canon, in the second stanza, the musical flow is no longer so unitary. The polyphonic texture is replaced by isorhythmic moments with strong madrigalian touches, like an exuberant reflection of the lyrical self. Here, Ligeti sets the polyphonic, imitative, unitary syntax of the first stanza in paratactic relation to the musical approach of the text based on the *Wortmalerei* or *wordpainting* principle. The text “shadows of earth” is intoned in the low register of the basses, while “Walls stand there” is attacked in *fff tutta la forza, risoluto*, with short breaths between sounds, where a perfect fifth emerges from the unison in the upper register. In the last verses, the musical emphasis falls on the word *Winde (Wind)*. The accumulation in *meccanico* style (accumulation of sounds, small rhythmic variations that create polyrhythms) ends up by phonetically transforming even the word itself – Ligeti indicates *allmählich von legato zu non legato übergehen, dabei vom Vokal „e“ zu einem neutralen Vokal (shift gradually from legato to non legato, then [shift] from the vowel „e“ to a neutral vowel)* and, later, *Vom neutralen Vokal allmählich zu „he-he-he“ (From the neutral vowel, gradually to “he-he-he”)*, following which comes the final transformation, *dann zu “ke-ke-ke” übergehen. Non legato deutlich artikulieren. (Then shift to “ke-ke-ke”. Clearly articulated non legato)*. Thus, the word *Winde* is transformed through a *meccanico*-type of peroration, preparing the

¹ “eine grausame Parodie der Sprache” in: Rolf Stelbmann, “«Zur Blindheit über-redete Augen» Hölderlins *Hälfte des Lebens* mit Celans *Tübingen, Jänner* als poetologisches Gedicht gelesen”, in: *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Schillergesellschaft*, ed. Wilfried Barner, Walter Müller-Seidel, Ulrich Ott, vol. 36, ed. Alfred Kröner, Stuttgart, 1992, p. 223.

² In *Artikulation* (1958), the process of communication stands as a starting point for the sounds generated electronically. *Aventures* (1962) and *Nouvelles Aventures* (1964) undertake a bold step into the metalinguistic realm of a synthetic language. Ligeti's passion for creating imaginary worlds gave rise to the anti-opera *Le Grand Macabre* (1974-1977, rev. 1996), placed in Breughelland, at the end of the world.

following word, *klirren*. The parataxis between the still walls and the flags fluttering in the wind – in other words, between two perspectives on language: the petrified, inflexible language, and the words thrown to the wind, according to the principle *verba volant* – is beautifully illustrated by Ligeti through specific techniques of the Renaissance madrigal.

In *Wenn aus der Ferne*, Ligeti makes a drastic selection from the thirteen stanzas of the poem, grouping the result into three poetic images, united through music: the nostalgic waiting for the beloved, the image of nature, the resigned and comforting sadness. To illustrate the poetic idea of the text, the composer employs a technique of superimposed voices, demarcated both in terms of rhythm (the long durations, associated with the basic idea, are contrasted with the rhythmic pattern in shorter durations), and in terms of register (the low register is represented by the keywords, while the verses in the upper register unfold unaltered). Thus, the first image is marked by the words [*wir*] *erwarten; entsetzliche und dunkle Zeit; [wir uns] gefunden* (*we are waiting; the terrible, dark time, we found each other*). It is against this terse background that the verses *Wenn aus der Ferne, da wir geschieden sind, ich dir noch kennbar bin* (*If from a distance, now we are parted, you still recognize me*) unfold. While the upper voices of the choir present the concrete action plan of the poetic self, which hopes for a reunion with its beloved, the lower voices occasionally summarize the focal point of the action. Thus, we are presented with an entanglement of meanings that place the poetic action in changing shades of light. A sudden flash of the lyrical self's memories conjures up scenes of nature: *War's Frühling? War's Sommer? (Was it spring? Was it summer?)*. The image of the birds and plants contrasts with the melancholy of the poetic self. The composer uses the images of nature to introduce the contrast in music as well. The mellifluous tone in the first part of the piece is contrasted with the rhythmic pattern in *meccanico* style, while at the same time keeping the canonic imitations. Once the memories of the times spent with its beloved return, the lyrical self relives the painful, resigned sigh of separation: *Ach! Wehe mir! Es waren schöne Zeiten, aber traurige Dämmerung folgte nachher* (*Oh! Woe is me! They were lovely days, but a gloomy dusk followed after*). The music follows suit, gradually shifting from the rhythmic contrast into an interwoven, diluted polyphonic-imitative discourse, and concluding on the prolonged sigh *Oh!*. The introspections of the lyrical self are musically expressed through the dense canonic fabric, in *stretto*. There are three isorhythmic stops that let the pronunciation of the literary text transpire through the imitative polyphony: the first moment occurs at *da wir uns ge-(fun...)*, illustrating an uncertain reunion of the two lovers, sung by half of the male voices, where on the last syllable of the still unfinished text (*-fun...*) the canon waves return; the second moment occurs when the text leaps to the theme of nature – *War's Frühling? War es Sommer? [Was it spring? Was it summer?]*, an important point in terms of form; the third moment is the last description of the surrounding environment (*hoher Alleen* [high avenues]), where, of all the voices, one alone gives the full pronunciation of *Alleen*, while the others pronounce only the first syllable, *All*, which brings about a significant semantic change of the literary text into *hoher All* (*high all*), which comes as a detachment from the worldly natural space into universal transcendence.

Unlike the first two pieces, where the introspections of the lyrical self, set in paratactic relation with scenes of nature, dominate the musical discourse through imitative sequences, in *Abendphantasie* (*Evening Fantasy*) the predominant images of nature create a euphoric, exuberant and abundant musical discourse. Here, the Renaissance techniques of

emphasizing the literary text give rise to a discursive form in which each new poetic idea finds a suggestive musical counterpart. *Maestoso – Più mosso, agitato – ancora più mosso, molto ritmico, tänzerisch-exaltiert – sub. Lento – sub. Più mosso, agitato con fuoco – Hymnisch-grandios – Quasi eco* are affective and *tempo*-related counterparts of the form segments in the last piece of the cycle.

While the attacks of the voices bring the literary text to life, their particular role is to achieve timbral transfiguration, dynamic changes, density fluctuation and the interplay of registers. Each new syntagm changes its timbral structure through successive entries and exits of the sixteen voices, sometimes even on every syllable. If the text *Blühet ein Frühling auf!* is musically expressed through a flash from the low to the high register, *unzählig blühn die Rosen* is presented in *stretto* imitation, with the same shift of registers from low to high. The *Klangfarbenkomposition* type of isorhythmic configurations alternate with short canonic sections, in close relationship with the semantic content of the text. As in the other two fantasies, the *meccanico* moment is also present here through the imitative repetition of the word *purpurne* (purple). The end of the *Evening Fantasy – Friedlich und heiter ist dann das Alter* (*My old age will be peaceful and serene*) – is illustrated by two contrasting musical characters, like a musical commentary mocking old age. The *Hymnisch-grandios* character illustrated by the adjectives “*Friedlich und heiter*” [“peaceful and serene”], in *fff tutta forza*, is contrasted with the coda marked *Quasi eco*, in *pp tenuto*, when the noun “*Alter*” [“old age”] is intoned, to which the previously articulated adjectives refer. The ironic attitude of the music towards this association is suggested by the intonation of the last syllable of the word *heiter* (*serene*), in *pp falsetto*, in the high bass register, a sudden interruption of the *Hymnisch-grandios* character, continued in *pp*, in a gradual appeasement leading up to the finale *morendo poco a poco al niente*.

Hölderlin-Gesänge Op. 35, by György Kurtág

As a method for organizing form, parataxis has also been described in relation to Kurtág's works, this time at the level of the musical form, for purely instrumental works.¹ Kurtág's meticulous attention to detail, his associative thinking and his fascination with the fragmentary reveal him as a “master of the intermittent gesture”. The discontinuous character of his music, in which continuity is solved metaphorically through unusual associations, is often based on fragmentary inspirations. Kurtág's fascination with the literary fragment found its musical expression in *Attila József-Töredékek*, Op. 20 (1981) and in *Kafka-Fragments*, Op. 24 (1985-1987). The freedom of interpretation that the fragment offers as a raw and yet unadulterated product becomes a fascinating ground of exploration for the composer: “That it is the exact opposite of «spick and span». That either I know precisely what I want or I have no idea, to the extent that I cannot even find the word to describe it. It gives me the freedom I need to set it to music: I can try and find it or add to it”². In *Hölderlin-Gesänge*, Op. 35 for baritone solo, the literary texts are fragments (*Friedrich*

¹ Juliana Hodkinson, “Aphorisms, fragments and paratactic synthesis: Hölderlin references and compositional style in György Kurtág's ...*quasi una fantasia*...”, in: *Musik&Forskning*29, Copenhagen, 2004, p. 31.

² Kurtág, György, *Three Interviews and Ligeti Hommages*, ed. BálintAndrásVarga, University of Rochester Press, 2009, pp. 55-56.

Hölderlin: An..., *Friedrich Hölderlin: Im Walde* and *Friedrich Hölderlin: Gestalt und Geist*) and late poems from Hölderlin's last years (*Friedrich Hölderlin: An Zimmern* and *Friedrich Hölderlin: Der Spaziergang*). The last piece of the cycle is a surprising excursus into the poetry of the twentieth century – *Paul Celan: Tübingen, Jänner* and is dedicated to Robert Klein, an art historian and aesthete with whom Kurtág shared a special friendship since his adolescent years in Banat.

Unlike Ligeti's cycle of choral works, where the three selected poems cover three different aspects of Hölderlin's creation (the poet's concern for language, the loss of the "eternal love" and the isolation from the surrounding world), in *Hölderlin-Gesänge* the literary text converges, in most pieces, on a single theme, common to both Hölderlin and Kurtág: the difficulty, up to impossibility of expression in the act of creation. In the opening piece of the *Hölderlin-Gesänge* cycle, the poetic self, overwhelmed by emotions, is unable to find its words – its desire to sing out its thoughts comes out in the form of tears. Thus, *Elysium*, the first word of the fragment *An ...* remains a key word, betraying the impossibility of the lyrical self to express its grief for the loss of Diotima, Hölderlin's name for his "immortal beloved". *Singen möchte ich von dir, aber nur Tränen* (*I want to sing of you, but only tears*). In the second piece, *Im Walde*, language is seen as an insufficient means of expression, a godlike power arbitrarily bestowed upon man, a double-edged sword that can either ruin him, or make him thrive. The ultimate goal of language, as a gift offered by the gods, is to discover love – *creating, destroying, and ending, and returning* (*schaffend, zerstörend, und untergehend, und wiederkehrend*). In *Gestalt und Geist*, the act of creation is expressed in the form of a continuous dialogue between spirit/content and form. Venturing into the ebb and flow of idea and form brings along dangers, which are as enticing as they are reckless. A "face to face" (*von Angesicht zu Angesicht*) look into the soul is definitely followed by the divine punishment - *you'll burn in flames* (*Du gehst in Flammen runter*) – like a lesson given by divinity for insolently daring to penetrate the mysteries of creation.

Compared to Ligeti's cycle of choral works, the difficulty of expression of the poetic message in *Hölderlin-Gesänge* is accompanied by the narrow, even austere range of the sonic palette – one baritone – which drastically limits the range of compositional devices. Although Kurtág's preference for a relatively small number of performers is an essential stylistic trait of his works¹, in the context of a theme such as the virtuality of language as a form of expression, compared to Ligeti's choral cycle, musical expression is put under a microscope from the beginning. In the case of the unaccompanied monody, the text-music relationship is more deeply anchored in the spoken word, to the extent that the composer claimed that certain songs of the cycle should be recited, not sung.²

Kurtág dedicates the first piece of the cycle to Dietrich Eberhard Sattler. The piece is based on a fragment whose words are separated by unequal spaces, indicating the places where the poet's thoughts have not yet been put on paper. "I have, however, set a fragmentary poem of his in *Hölderlin*": *An...* It is a characteristic poem of elision; I have to

¹ See *Eszka Emlékszaj* Op. 12 for soprano and violin, *Attila József-Fragmente* Op. 20 for soprano solo, *Kafka-Fragmente* Op. 24 for soprano and violin.

² György Kurtág, *Three Interviews and Ligeti Hommages*, ed. Bálint András Varga, University of Rochester Press, 2009, pp. 33-34.

divine what was left out and turn it into music.”¹In this confession, Kurtág remarks on the fragmentary nature of Hölderlin's poem and explains how he approached the fragmentary structure from a musical standpoint. In Kurtág's piece, the two superimposed layers, i.e. of the unwritten idea and of the written word, are rendered through two different modes of attack: the sung word is the equivalent of the written word, while the wordless ideas are expressed through melismas, with figurations sung *a boccachiusa*.

Example 1: György Kurtág, *Hölderlin-Gesänge*, Op. 35, *Friedrich Hölderlin: An...*, mm. 1-5

In its compositional approach to the fragmentary, the piece *Friedrich Hölderlin: An ...* conveys the poetic idea, as in Sattler's edition, by emphasizing the elliptical nature of Hölderlin's poem. Both Sattler's edition and Kurtág's piece illustrate and sensibly recreate bits of meaning, as in a fresco, without aspiring towards a full restoration. Thus, the interpretations of Hölderlin's oeuvre remain, through the process of interpolation, open to semantic multivalence. Kurtág's openness to various interpretations, whether in music, literature, or even art, is reflected in his relentless pursuit of an honest, faithful and truthful representation of the creative act (above all, of his own works) and of the performance of the works. The melismas in *Friedrich Hölderlin: An ...* suggest the search for what Hölderlin left unfinished. Kurtág employs the same melismatic expression in *Friedrich Hölderlin: An Zimmern*, the fourth piece of the cycle *Hölderlin-Gesänge*, where the

¹ In: Kurtág, György, *Three Interviews and Ligeti Hommages*, ed. Bálint András Varga, University of Rochester Press, 2009, p. 55.

verses of the quatrain are interspersed by melismas on long syllables from the neighbouring verses, like a reflection on their meaning. Two verses emerge from this interplay between melismas and the sung text, highlighted by the expansive melodic line and by the lack of interpolated melismas: *Was hier wir sind, kann dort ein Gott ergänzen / Mit Harmonien und ewigem Lohn* (What here we are, can there by a God be completed / With harmonies, eternal recompense and peace). By extrapolation, the melismas in *Friedrich Hölderlin: An ...* are meant to “round out” the poet's fragment. The correspondence between the two pieces is strengthened by the *bocca chiusa* form of attack in the opening of the piece *Friedrich Hölderlin: An Zimmern*, which is also characteristic of all the melismas sung in *Friedrich Hölderlin: An...*

The turn towards twentieth-century literature, seen in the last piece of the *Hölderlin-Gesänge* cycle, *Paul Celan: Tübingen, Jänner*, serves to steer the interpretation of Hölderlin's poetry towards the disintegration of the word as a form of artistic expression. Samuel Beckett, fascinated with Hölderlin's late poems, praises his attempts to wrestle with the intricacies of language and, especially, his surrender and acceptance of his defeat. The triad “you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on”¹ reflects the artist's determination to persevere, aware of the futility of his act, which will vanish in the silence born from the surplus of a worn-out, banal language.

The same type of emphatic peroration also occurs in *Paul Celan: Tübingen, Jänner* by Kurtág. Starting from *lallen, lallen* (a German word expressing the babbling of babies, which in our literary context suggests the origins and beginnings of expression, of language), the poetic text takes a degrading, mechanical turn, morphing into the nonsensical word *Pallaksch*. In Kurtág's piece, the two words, *lallen* and *Pallaksch*, stand in an antithetical relationship. The cantabile, expressive character, preceded by ornamental appoggiaturas of the word *lallen*, turns into sturdy and increasingly desperate leaps, *in äussersten Wut und Verzweiflung*, reaching the word *Pallaksch* only after a suppressed breath (*geräuschvoll, gleichsam erstickend einatmen*). The frenzied repetition of the word *Pallaksch* in *ff beinahe brühlend* has an utterly unexpected ending. From the overflowing nonsense, at the very climax of madness, the last intonation dies away in a *pianissimo, plötzlich, flüchtig*, suggesting the fall into silence, resignation.

Ligeti's and Kurtág's oeuvres represent two different approaches to Hölderlin's work. If Ligeti broke Hölderlin's poems into fragments, Kurtág used texts left in fragmented form, which he passed through a process of (at times drastic) selection. Their attitude towards Hölderlin's text is therefore profoundly divergent: while Ligeti uses the literary text to the advantage of the complex musical structures for sixteen voices and of a madrigalistic expressiveness whereby the proper understanding of the performed text is significantly hindered, Kurtág, by composing songs for solo baritone, remains close to the text, which occasionally takes on the aspect of a recited pseudo-intonation, endowing the monody with variations of character that reflect the composer's semantic interpretation.

Starting from a large-scale construction, Ligeti's fantasies approach the technique of parataxis from the perspective of the correspondences between different large formal sections. In Kurtág's songs, the paratactic technique occasionally works from word to

¹ Nixon, Mark, “Beckett and Germany in the 1930s”, in: *A Companion to Samuel Beckett*, ed. S. E. Gontarski, Blackwell Publishing, 2010, p. 139.

word. In this case, the emphasis is on the expressiveness of the micro structures and on their direct relationship to the literary text.

The parallel literary analysis undertaken by Rolf Stelbmann enables us to discover one of the fundamental points of intersection between Ligeti and Kurtág – their concern for language. Ligeti's interest in language is also evident in the *Three Fantasies after Friedrich Hölderlin*, through phonetic extrapolations, polysemy and elision. While we can easily recognize the “crooked tie” so confidently worn by Ligeti, this aesthetic ambience reveals an entire process of consumption of language, between Hölderlin and Beckett or Celan. Kurtág's focus on the problem of language as a form of artistic expression is evident in each of the six songs of the cycle *Hölderlin-Gesänge*, culminating with the last song set to Paul Celan's poetry. The preservation of and faithfulness to the literary text reflect the composer's submissiveness to the source of inspiration. Here, music comes to envelop, in various shades, the semantics of the original text.

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