

Encountering Kurtág in post-war Budapest

György Ligeti

I met György Kurtág for the first time in September 1945 when we were both taking the entrance examination for Sándor Veress' composition class at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest. He was 19 years old, I was 22. In those days, just a few months after the end of the war, there was a desperate shortage of food and accommodation in Budapest: about three quarters of the houses in the city lay in ruins. For those coming to Budapest from elsewhere it was almost impossible to find a bed for the night; any hopes of having an individual room for studying, let alone a piano, were unrealisable dreams. The "apartment" that I rented thus comprised a worn mattress on a stone floor in a shabby kitchen that smelled of town gas and bugs, in the remote district of Kőbánya. I can no longer recall where and how Kurtág was living at the time. There was not a single pane of glass in the whole of Budapest and the empty window frames were stuffed with paper, or at best had thin wooden boards nailed over them. Over the course of the autumn, as it grew colder, the windows had to be kept covered at all times, which meant that it was dark during the daytime as well. There was no fuel for heating and bitterly cold draughts blew through the overcrowded apartments.

We hardly noticed the harshness of everyday life, however. The war was over and the city was pulsating with the variety and colour of its cultural and artistic life. The end of the Nazi dictatorship released a burst of intellectual energy, and the arts blossomed. Starving and freezing, yet with undreamt of enthusiasm, the writers and artists who were still alive got down to work. We were filled with so much hope for the future in those days that we completely failed to notice that we were already in the process of sliding from one totalitarian dictatorship into another: the Stalinist, Communist dictatorship was initially only apparent in a disguised form but would soon put an abrupt end to the freedom and blossoming of art and culture.

The fact that more than half of the city's Jewish population had been killed by the German and Hungarian Nazis was a devastating loss to intellectual life. Pre-war Budapest had a population of roughly 1.5 million people, slightly more than 150,000 of whom were Jews. The majority of the Jews were transported to German death camps or shot by the armed units of Hungarian Nazis, the Arrow Cross Party, in Budapest. Most of those who survived were

concentrated in the ghetto which had been built by the Nazis in the summer of 1944.

The Soviet occupation forces allowed free elections to take place in the autumn of 1945, more for tactical than ideological reasons. The elected democratic but provisionally centre-left government encouraged the blossoming of intellectual life and tolerated the avant-garde artistic movements.

The leading Hungarian poet of the day, Miklós Radnóti, was murdered by the Nazis. The poets who had survived founded literary journals. Perhaps the most important and inspiring of these was called “Válasz” (“Answer”), which published young poets of the highest calibre such as Sándor Weöres and János Pilinszky, who were followers of a radically modern school of literary thought. The poet-painter Lajos Kassák was the leader of the constructivists; the “European School” and the group surrounding the recently deceased painter Lajos Vajda were at the centre of interest in the fine arts.

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Kurtág and I were attracted and influenced by this intense artistic and literary life. Despite the painful experiences of the Nazi era, we were both filled with youthful optimism, full of hope for a modern Hungarian culture. We were both followers of Bartók and saw Bartók’s music as the basis for the further development of a new, chromatic-modal musical idiom that was intended to be international and yet rooted in the Hungarian tradition. Our friendship intensified when we discovered that we not only shared the same musical ideas, but also had the same political views (pronounced left-wing intellectual views that did not, however, conform to official Communist philosophy) and a similar family background: we both came from Hungarian-Jewish (or in Kurtág’s case, only half-Jewish) intellectual families that had been assimilated into Hungarian culture. We also shared another cultural experience: we both

came from regions in old Hungary that had fallen to Romania after the First World War; we had both attended Romanian-speaking secondary schools and, owing partly to the Francophile orientation of the Romanian culture, were strongly attracted to France in our feelings and artistic ideas.

Kurtág came from Lugoj, a small town in the Banat not far from the Romanian-Yugoslavian border, and had studied in Temeschwar, the capital of the Banat. I was born in Dicsöszentmárton, a tiny town in the middle of Transylvania, and grew up in Klausenburg, the biggest town in the province. Independently to each other, we both simultaneously took the risk, in September 1945, of crossing the Romanian-Hungarian border without papers, illegally and on foot, to get to Budapest. Our decision to take this risk was based on the same reason: we both dreamed of studying at the Budapest Academy of Music, the best music college in South-East Europe, whose impressive tradition reached all the way back to Franz Liszt.

However, the real aim of our pilgrimage was not to reach the college itself, but Béla Bartók, who was expected back from New York in the autumn of 1945 to resume his professorship at the music college and also reclaim his prominent position in Hungarian music life. Although neither of us had met him, we worshipped him with abandon and could hardly wait to meet him in person and listen to his words. You can imagine our distress when we saw the black flag flying above the music college on the day of our entrance examination and discovered on the very same day that Bartók had died in New York at the age of 64. Our joy at being admitted to the composition class was thus entirely overshadowed by the pain at the irreversible loss of our intellectual father.

An altogether spontaneous friendship developed between Kurtág and me during that half an hour in which we waited, hearts a-flutter, in the Art Nouveau corridor at the college to be called into the examination room. I felt that I had found a musical companion in Kurtág, as our views were so kindred and our ideas of a new musical style so identical. I was attracted by Kurtág's shyness, his introverted behaviour and complete lack of vanity and conceit. He was intelligent, honest and, in a highly complex way, simple. He later told me that he originally thought I was a Protestant theology student. We both laughed a great deal about this assumption: he had interpreted my provincial shyness as religious austerity, an interpretation that could hardly have been further from my true character.

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The friendship that sprung up as we were waiting for our entrance examination was also extended to a third young composer, Franz Sulyok. He was 20 when we met him and both Kurtág and I admired him for his elegance, absolute uprightness and intellectual independence. We three soon became inseparable friends and attended Sándor Veress' composition class together. Sulyok shared a similar family background to Kurtág and me, although he came from Budapest and not the provinces, and he had similar musical ideals.

Circumstances have led us to live in three different parts of Europe. Sulyok was the first to leave Stalinist Hungary, in 1949. He undertook the potentially fatal risk of illegally crossing first the Hungarian-Czechoslovakian border and then the Czechoslovakian-Austrian border. He managed to reach Paris, studied with Darius Milhaud and Nadia Boulanger, later moved to Bujumbura in Africa and is now back in Paris. Sándor Veress also left Hungary in 1949, after which Kurtág and I continued our studies first with Pál Járdányi and then with Ferenc Farkas. At the same time, Kurtág was also studying the piano with Pál Kadosa and attending Leo Weiner's famous chamber music classes. I said farewell to Kurtág and his wife in December 1956 when both I and my wife fled to Austria. Kurtág remained in Budapest and has now become Hungary's most significant composer.

Despite this geographical separation, our friendship has survived entirely intact. When we meet up from time to time, we still recognise the consistency of our musical ideals, irrespective of the different ways in which we have developed since the years we spent together in Budapest.

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