

**scottish
ensemble**

Tom Service on: György Kurtág

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An introduction to György Kurtág

By Tom Service

Márta - his wife, his life, his pianistic and soul-partner - is gone, but the 95-year-old Hungarian composer György Kurtág continues; with his major project - THE major project - of his life, in a sense, already(!) complete: his opera on Beckett's *Fin de Partie*, ('Endgame') which premiered at La Scala in 2018 (complete video, in good quality, on a 'tube link here):



Like all of Kurtág's music, under its apparent Beckettian sense of the Futility of All Things - what is to be done, since there is nothing to be done?, etc, etc - and its confrontation with the darkneses of the century (the last one - well, and this one, too), there is an equally Beckettian optimism in the one thing that will really outlast his and Beckett's and all of our own Endgames, which is the making of art. And for Kurtág, that means the making of art in multiple dimensions: as teacher, as performer, and as composer.

The opera on Endgame feels like a summation in so many ways, not least because of its scale: for a composer who has so often made assemblages of fragments his modus operandi:

- [Kafka Fragments](#) (*on Spotify*)
- [Jatekok](#) ('Games'!) (*on Spotify*)
- [12 Microludes for String Quartet](#) (*on YouTube*)
- [Signs, Games, and Messages for solo violin](#) (*on Spotify*)

Given this, the gigantism of a full-scale opera premiered as a 92-year-old composer feels even more miraculous.

But scale in Kurtág's music is a paradox: it's not really that he composes fragments (I mean he does, not least when he gives the pieces that precise title::: what am I talking about? hang on, on-hang, there is no hanging, there is no on, etc), since in just a handful of notes, he can find an eternity; the power of individual pieces (literally any one of the [Kafka Fragments](#), and that entire cycle, designed to be performed as a complete piece of 40 Fragments, makes about an hour's searing of your spirit by the violin and soprano) is frightening, revelatory, and disproportionate to the amount of clock time they take up. In other words, Kurtág's music is always made on the biggest scale in the sense of its ferocious directness, its fierce joys and fiercer despairs.

Where does it come from? The trauma of the 20th century and its transcendence; an old story, and an eternally new one. He reveals more [in this book](#) than I've encountered anywhere else, if you would like to do some further reading.

There are some more of my thoughts on Kurtág's music [in an article I wrote in 2013](#).

In terms of recommended listening, adding [Fin de Partie](#) is essential, and just a couple of other pieces and encounters too:



Movement for Viola & Orchestra (1954)



95th Birthday Concert in Amsterdam



Martá & György perform his transcriptions of Bach



György playing Mozart



Gergely Fazekas with Kirill Gerstein on Fin de Partie