

Opera début by a once-in-a-century composer

Markus Stenz conducts the première of György Kurtág's "Fin de Partie"

Markus Stenz is not the only person to be amazed by the enormous energy and spirit of purposefulness that the now 92-year-old Hungarian composer has displayed working on his first opera. Once more, György Kurtág has tried something completely new. For "Fin de Partie", which sets to music the Samuel Beckett drama of the same name (English "Endgame"), is his very first foray into the genre of opera – and also by far the longest composition by this avant-gardist, acclaimed as the "master of the miniature". He cherished the desire to set Beckett's play to music for several decades. Kurtág worked on the 450-page score for some seven years, lately in close contact with Markus Stenz, who will now conduct the first performance at La Scala in Milan on 15 November, 2018.

When a journalist for the German weekly "DIE ZEIT" asked György Kurtág for an interview ahead of his 90th birthday two years ago, she was told that he "had things to do: his opera, Beckett's Endgame, the whole of human life." But he found the time for a talk all the same, admitting that he was scared by the great task of opera. That is something, however, that is also a central motivation for this artist: "The excitement consists in always finding what is most uncomfortable," he says – for Kurtág, the creative process of composition is driven by constantly challenging himself. With "Fin de Partie", he is now presenting a two-hour-long opus, although his works up to now have usually been characterised by their fundamentally aphoristic character and sometimes extreme brevity: "fragmentary, in love with all that is splintered, in fact just made for an era that rejects the big picture – and not only in music." (Christine Lemke-Matwey). Absurd theatre is one of the most popular artistic responses to this era, and Samuel Beckett is one of its literary figureheads. György Kurtág experienced Beckett's drama "Fin de Partie" as early as 1957 at the French première in Paris and straight afterwards went and bought himself a text edition that is practically identical with the 2018 libretto: "Kurtág has used the text and scenes in the French-language libretto one to one and actually transfers the speech melody to the vocal parts without any affected operatic gestures," Markus Stenz says. "And the music always supports the flow of speech and the musical subtext always arises from the word."

When his provocative eschatological drama was first released, Beckett caused a veritable theatre scandal. Four people, possibly the last survivors of a catastrophe, are in an empty room: the blind and crippled Hamm (sung at the Scala by Frode Olsen) is in a wheelchair, his servant Clov (Leigh Melrose), whose stiff legs almost stop him walking and prevent him from sitting down, and Hamm's parents Nell (Hilary Summers) and Nagg (Leonard Cortellazzi), two leg amputees who are vegetating in rubbish bins. Clov would like to leave the tyrant Hamm, while knowing that this would mean the inevitable death of the three immobilised people. But probably also his own, as Hamm possesses stores of food that have kept them alive up to now. "Extremely little happens in Beckett's play – and Kurtág matches this musically. Both have mastered the art of saying a great amount with very few notes or words," is how Stenz outlines the score and the stage action. "The sounds that Kurtág finds for the story are inspiring and colourful: concentrated psychograms made up of both pessimistic and humorous colours."

Markus Stenz's outstanding expertise in 20th-century music has already led to his conducting numerous first performances. In the field of music drama, they have included Detlev Glanert's "Caligula" (2006) and "Solaris" (2012), and Hans Werner Henze's "Das verratene Meer" ("The Betrayed Sea") (1990), "Venus und Adonis" (1997) and "L'Upupa und der Triumph der Sohnesliebe" ("The Hoopoe and the Triumph of Filial Love") (2003). During his time as Cologne's general music director, the Rhineland-born conductor already presented music by György Kurtág to concert audiences: for example, his Beethoven reminiscence "...quasi una fantasia..." op. 27/1 and "Stele" op. 33. As the principal conductor of the Dutch Radio Filharmonisch Orkest, he has now put the "Petite musique solennelle en hommage à Pierre Boulez 90" on the programme in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw for 9 March, 2019.

But first, Markus Stenz, who was ably aided by his musical assistant Arnaud Arbet during the rehearsal phase with the Orchestra del Teatro alla Scala and vocal soloists, will have the honour of premiering "Fin de Partie" in Milan's Scala on 15 November, 2018. The international music world has been looking forward with great anticipation to the performance of this work, commissioned by the Fondazione Teatro alla Scala. The opera,

directed by Pierre Audi, will present the audience with a sort of combination of chamber-music theatre and theatrical chamber music, according to Stenz: “an artwork with an enormously reduced and finely-woven structure and extremely nuanced timing in the sequence of pause/sound/pause (whenever Beckett calls for “un temps” (silence) to separate the spoken segments, Kurtág separates the passages of singing with a composed, musical pause); in short, a subtle sphere of sound.” That turns this eschatological vision, with its unusual instrumentation – which includes upright piano with “supersordino” (a constantly-depressed mute pedal), cimbalom, bayan and vibraphone alongside a classical orchestra –, into a truly sensuous experience. It is not for nothing that Kurtág is “marvelled at for his authenticity and the magical freshness of his musical language” (ZEIT).

The subtitle of this new, one-act stage work, which this once-in-a-century Hungarian composer has dedicated to his composition teacher, Ferenc Farkas, is “Scènes et monologues”. This refers to the fact that “only” some 56 percent of Beckett’s drama has been set to music here. György Kurtág has, however, declared his firm determination to put music to the rest of the text as well, without any cuts – with the resulting future prospect of a four-hour opera. But it is not the desire for success or public attention that drives the 92-year-old. Could it even be that his audience has yet to be born? “I cast a bottle into the sea. Perhaps it will be fished out, perhaps it will take 300 years or it will completely disappear. I don’t know.” (ZEIT).

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