

Left Bank Concert Society  
Smithsonian American Art Museum Steinway Series  
McEvoy Auditorium, 3 PM  
October 11, 2009

Notes by Bonnie Jo Dopp

Our concert today bears the title “Transylvanian Odyssey.” Implied is the epic journey and triumphant success after long hardship that music from this historically fluidly bounded Hungarian/Czech/Romanian part of the world has had. Ernst von Dohnányi’s home city of Pressburg, Hungary (Pozsony to Hungarians), was given to Czechoslovakia after WWI, renamed Bratislava, and is now the capital of the Slovak Republic. Béla Bartók’s home area was in Austria-Hungary (where Transylvania was when Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula*) and is now divided among three countries. György Kurtág came from the Romanian part of the same Transylvanian region (he has said that his ‘mother tongue’ is ‘Bartók’). He suffered through years of Communist rule in Hungary.

These three gifted composers all identified themselves as Hungarians, though Dohnányi, who specialized in performing German masterpieces, and Bartók, who investigated and was inspired by more than a half-dozen folk music cultures, spent their last years in the United States. Kurtág, who speaks seven languages, now lives in France. American Dina Koston, who studied with Nadia Boulanger in France and felt that recordings of Polish-French harpsichordist Wanda Landowska taught her much, greatly admired the work of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Hungarian composers. She once wondered why she seemed to write ‘Hungarian music’ herself. As British music journalist Norman Lebrecht has written, “Hungary’s musical contribution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is out of all proportion to its size.” The arduous, tortuous, colorful road from Dohnányi to Bartók to Kurtág to Koston, from Transylvania to Washington DC, allows for music made along the way to be at home wherever ears are open to it.

**György Kurtág**  
(b. 1926)

*Jelek, játékok és üzenetek*

[**Signs, Games and Messages**] (1989-97)

For violin, viola, and cello, in various combinations as solos, duos,  
and trios                      Movements TBA

Transylvanian-born György Kurtág spent his childhood in Romania with his Hungarian parents and moved to Budapest in 1946, becoming a Hungarian citizen two years later. In 1949, Hungary’s 40-year communist regime began. But for a year of study in Paris, and one in West Berlin, Kurtág remained in Budapest until he moved to Berlin in 1993. His studies at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music (formerly known as the Budapest Academy, where Bartók had studied and Dohnányi had studied and taught) were in piano performance and composition. Although he slowly built a reputation as a modern composer with something distinctive to say, much of his professional work in Hungary was as a pianist, instrumental and vocal coach, and professor of piano and chamber music performance. His 1959 Op. 1 was a string quartet; though he has written other works for that medium, he has yet to use ‘String Quartet No. 2’ as a title.

His first composition with the ‘games’ in its title was *Elő-Játékok* [Pre-Games], a set of simple pieces for children commissioned by a piano teacher in 1973. From 1974 to 1979, he composed another piano set titled simply *Játékok* (first series). *Játékok* (second series) was composed from 1979 to 1998. He arranged parts of these as *6 Bagatelles* for flute, double bass, and piano in 1981 and produced *13 Pieces from Játékok* for two cimbaloms the following year. He arranged some for four-hand piano, for him and his wife, Márta Kinsker, to play. There were earlier *Jelek*-titled pieces as well; some of them turn up reworked among *Signs, Games and Messages*.

Rachel Beckles Willson, in her article on Kurtág for *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, writes that since the 1973 commission, ‘Games’ pieces “have formed a constant backcloth to all his compositional activity.” The original pieces “were intended to offer children a liberating approach both to making music and to the piano itself, but evolved into a liberating activity for the composer too. The graphic notation employed is intended to stimulate the performer (adult or child) to experiment with sound and sensation rather than to analyse the score intellectually and, according to the performance instructions, to revive the spontaneity of such practices as ‘free declamation, folk music parlando-rubato [and] Gregorian chant.’” This playful attitude extends to games the composer plays in the scores, musically inserting telephone numbers of his friends, for example, or other specific references to people he knows. Willson reports that as late as 1994, the composer worked the harmony from an older ‘Games’ piece into *Stele*, Op. 33, written for the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Before it was published, *Jelek, játékok és üzenetek* evolved over seven years into a characteristically Kurtágian set of short bagatelle-like pieces, presenting, in Willson’s words, “a paring down of Kurtág’s style to its barest gestural, speech-like core...” and adding to his collection of Signs, Games, and Messages, which continues to grow!

Because our performers will announce from the stage which parts of Kurtág’s opus-in-progress to present, look out and listen up for any number of Kurtág gambits, among which could be: metal mutes (the composer calls these ‘hotel’ mutes – *Hoteldämpfer* – for use when practicing where only the performer can hear the result) ‘Bartók’ [snapped] pizzicatos, slow microtonal vibratos, extremely high notes from the cello in a piece honoring John Cage (Kurtág suggested that this violin piece be played by the cellist, just to make it more challenging; a ‘liberating approach’ Cage would have loved), a string trio sounding like a foghorn, a contrapuntal homage to Bach, two versions of the same material played by different forces, a dance for a child, a piece 36 seconds long (and no piece as long as 3 minutes, 10 seconds), flashes of Hungarian folk melodies and rhythms, and more. Meaningful messages of human attachment, memory, and grief are here, too. Stay open, absorb what you hear, and do not be surprised if you find yourself wanting more of this master-of-essences composer in your musical life. Just say, “Take me out to the Kurtág game!”

For further exploration:

A January, 2009 article, “György Kurtág: Great Hungarian Jewish Composer, No Monk,” by Benjamin Ivry has been posted to <http://www.forward.com/articles/15028/>

A 1996 documentary film about Kurtág titled *L'homme allumete* is now available on DVD as *György Kurtág: The Matchstick Man*.

**Dina Koston**                    **“Solo for Violin: Homage to Béla Bartók” (2006, rev.2008)**  
(1934-2009)

We present this expression of Dina Koston’s appreciation for Bartók to honor the memory of one of Washington DC’s most passionate advocates of excellence in chamber music programming and performance. The piece was written for Sally McLain who gave its premiere performance at the Ratner Museum in Bethesda, Maryland, in May 2008. Ms. Koston wrote no program note for the work, but she spoke to Ms. McLain about it.

Bartók’s last chamber music piece was his solo violin sonata, written for Yehudi Menuhin in 1944. That work was itself an homage to Bach, so it is not surprising that Ms. Koston, who loved Bach’s music as greatly as she did Bartók’s, might find inspiration from it for her own solo violin composition. However, she said that she had not realized until after her piece was completed that echoes of Bartók were part of its makeup. She then amplified her title for the work.

Sally McLain says of “Solo for Violin” (originally titled “For Solo Violin”): At the beginning of the score Dina wrote ‘Introspective,’ which certainly captures the essence of the piece. It is very personal and the strategic use of very soft dynamics, the mute, harmonics, and varying degrees of pauses, commas, and fermati are all effective devices she employs. Near the end of the piece, she wrote “A memory—sounds drift in and out—flautando [flute-like] or almost flautando. Without pulse; freely.” Over the very last note of the piece, she wrote, “Hold as long as possible, diminuendo al niente [to nothing].”

Trills are very important in the piece, as they are in many of Dina’s compositions. She described the trills as being two equal notes. She wanted a quivering on the two notes, like an increased vibrato, and said never to sit on either note. She had a very specific sound in her head and when I worked on the piece with her the trills were the hardest things for me to get to sound just the way she wanted. It was really exciting when I actually did achieve it!

There are no section headings on the score. The opening 11 bars are introductory, and then the piece proper starts in bar 12. There are three passages of overall ascension, both in pitch and dynamics: first to a high F double sharp, next to a high G sharp and G, then to a high A double sharp. Then a longer passage follows which ascends to a high, but very soft C sharp (leading tone of D, the note of import at the end). Next comes the muted section of the piece: a section with high, rapid notes, followed by trills and harmonics, followed by more high rapid notes. It has a feel of other-worldliness. Then the mute comes off for the last section of the piece. A remembrance of previous material leads into an emphasis on the note D, ever softer, alternating between ‘open D’ and ‘fingered D.’ Then come the ‘memory’ notes, and finally the long D, on which she specifies not to play with the open D string.

Dina Koston died in Washington, DC in April 2009. She had studied piano and music theory from early childhood. She later studied piano with Mieczyslaw Horszowski and Leon Fleisher and composition with Nadia Boulanger at Fontainebleau and Luciano

Berio in Italy. As pianist for the Theater Chamber Players, which she co-founded with Leon Fleisher in 1968, Ms. Koston performed an extensive repertoire of contemporary and older classical works. She brought her interest and knowledge of new music to the planning and preparation of programs for the Theater Chamber Players.

The Left Bank Quartet often appeared on Theater Chamber Players programs and the Left Bank Concert Society continues that group's tradition of offering masterworks from both past and present composers during our own seasons.

For further exploration:

Sally McLain's original performance of this piece may be viewed on YouTube in two six-minute segments. Various sections of Bartók's solo violin sonata are also on YouTube. Compare and contrast!

**Béla Bartók**                      **String Quartet No. 1, Op. 7 (1909)**  
(1881-1945)

One hundred years ago, Béla Bartók completed the first of what would be considered European concert music's most important series of string quartets since Beethoven's. There would be six in all (ten fewer than Beethoven, five more than Debussy and Ravel), spanning more than 30 years of creative effort.

Rather like a poem crafted from an epic, essential elements of Bartók's First String Quartet (composed in 1908 and finished in 1909) originated in a violin concerto he had written for a young woman who never played it. Stefi Geyer rejected both his music and his passionate attention, so Bartók created what he called a 'funeral dirge' that distilled themes, harmonies, and tempos he associated with Stefi into the opening movement of a string quartet. Grief-stricken as the slow, intertwined polyphony of Op. 7's *Lento* may be, rising intensity, homophonic resolve, and a return to the 'Stefi theme' an octave higher at the end of the movement all indicate some achievement of acceptance. Following immediately, at a pace labeled *Poco a poco accelerando al Allegretto*, a mood of cautious optimism ensues. Transformed melodic material from the first movement shapes a four-note theme that plays against running two-note motifs, pizzicato bass notes in the cello, and whole-note scales. Still seriously intense, the three-quarter lilt in much of the second movement suggests a measure of tranquility.

The third movement's *Introduzione* cites an art song well known in Bartók's day, titled "Just a Fair Girl," which can be interpreted as a personal toss of the head from the composer with regard to the object of his former heartache. Things get fiercer in the following *Allegro - Allegro vivace*, where, in the words of Dorothy Lamb Crawford, Bartók submits the 'Stefi motif' to "barbaric tremolos," taunting, ridicule via a "burlesque fugue" and finally to transformation into what really had begun to interest the composer, a "pentatonic folk song." Musicians and audiences of the time recognized none of the personal references in the work (though Hungarians would have recognized the quote from "Just a Fair Girl") – the violin concerto containing the original melody for Stefi had not been published or heard.

Bartók knew he was writing music during a time of artistic change with regard to content and style. He foresaw that 'expressing oneself' in art would become literally 'all

the rage' during his lifetime. In a letter composed eight days after the First String Quartet was finished, he said,

It is curious that in music until now only enthusiasm, love, grief, or at most, distress figured as motivating causes—the so-called exalted ideals. Whereas vengeance, the caricature, sarcasm are only living or are going to live their musical lives in our times.... I am unable to imagine products of art otherwise than as manifestations of the creator's boundless enthusiasm, regret, fury, revenge, distorting ridicule or sarcasm. In the past I did not believe, until I experienced it myself, that a man's works designate the events, the guiding passions of his life more exactly than his biography. (Quoted in Tibor Tallian's *Béla Bartók the man and his work*, 1981)

For further exploration:

Commentary by R. G. Bratby on Bartók's First String Quartet is online at <http://www.classicalnotes.co.uk/home.html>

Dorothy Lamb Crawford's essay, "Love and Anguish: Bartók's Expressionism" (in *Bartók Perspectives* by Elliott Antokoletz, Victoria Fischer, Benjamin Suchoff, Oxford University Press, 2000) is available via Google Books online. Search on author name and short title.

The full score of this work is online at:

[http://imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/1/13/IMSLP18895-PMLP12567-Bart\\_k\\_-\\_String\\_Quartet\\_No.\\_1\\_\\_Op.\\_7\\_\\_score\\_.pdf](http://imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/1/13/IMSLP18895-PMLP12567-Bart_k_-_String_Quartet_No._1__Op._7__score_.pdf)

**Ernst von Dohnányi                      Piano Quintet in C Minor, Op. 1 (1895)**  
(1877-1960)

Hungarian pianist, composer, conductor, and teacher Ernst von Dohnányi (Dohnányi Ernő in Hungary) stayed in Budapest for his academic musical studies and persuaded his young friend Bartók to do the same. The two had some of the same piano and composition teachers, but the older man, a stunningly accomplished pianist who would eventually spend one year performing all of Beethoven's piano works and another year playing all Mozart's piano concertos, was strongly influenced as a composer by his love of the Germanic mainstream. Bartók was a fine pianist, but unlike Dohnányi, he did not tour internationally with a wide repertoire; he played mainly his own compositions. In his role as conductor, Dohnányi's early programming of Bartók's works reflected his insight into the younger man's genius. Together, they set a new course for Hungarian musical culture, though each spent his last years in the United States.

Dohnányi's Op. 1 Piano Quintet reminds us of Brahms, who was so impressed by it that he arranged its Viennese public premiere, with the composer at the keyboard. "I could not have written it better myself," he is reported to have said, after hearing it played in his own home from the manuscript that his friend Hans Koessler, Dohnányi's composition teacher and the dedicatee of the Quintet, had brought him. Performances of the work earned enthusiastic reviews throughout Dohnányi's life; he played it as late as 1957 in Ohio, receiving an ovation from the audience.

The Quintet opens with an energetic Sonata-Allegro in C minor with a C-major coda. The second movement A-major/-minor Scherzo is a typical rapid dance in three-quarter time. Rachmaninoff may come to mind during the lyrical, romantic Adagio in ABA form. The rondo Finale, in 5/4 alternating with 6/4 time, ends with a coda that quotes the opening of the first movement, tying the whole work together most pleasantly.

For further exploration:

*Perspectives on Ernst von Dohnányi*, edited by James A. Grymes (Scarecrow Press, 2005) contains essays and historical documents, including some by Bartók.

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