

JULIANA HODKINSON

Aphorisms, fragments and paratactic synthesis: Hölderlin references and compositional style in György Kurtág's *...quasi una fantasia...*

Introduction

In this article, I wish to consider the relation between fragmentation and synthesis in György Kurtág's *...quasi una fantasia...*, Op. 27 no. 1 (1987-88). I draw on Hölderlin references, manifested at various levels in this work—most clearly in a quotation from the final four lines of the poem "Andenken",¹ added to the score at the start of the fourth movement²—, to exemplify Kurtág's formation of a compositional style based on the (partial) integration of both imported and self-generated aphorisms and fragments. Finally, I propose that the kind of uneasy synthesis achieved between these disparate fragmentary and aphoristic elements in *...quasi una fantasia...* is paratactic, similar to the sense in which Adorno described Hölderlin's late style.

...quasi una fantasia... casts a self-consciously retrospective eye over a number of previous works—both from Kurtág's own *oeuvre* and from that of some of his favourite composers and authors. At the same time, the piece also represents a move towards new terrain in Kurtág's interests including the use of larger ensembles, and re-spatialisations of musicians in the concert-hall.

Although the general development in Kurtág's *oeuvre* seems to be from small-scale, aphoristic works to a more holistic synthesis, the early pieces—despite their brevity and limited instrumental forces (precisely, in fact, due to their concise and compact nature)—appear in some respects more 'complete', whilst more expanded pieces from the end of the 1980s onwards seem far less 'finished'—strangely puzzling, even, in their apparent lack of closure. Despite a higher degree of flow in these later works, and a fuller body of sound, despite the continuity which lies in the constant return of earlier material and its elaboration (through repetition, re-instrumentation, echo, and variation),

1 The full poem can be read in Friedrich HÖLDERLIN: *Sämtliche Werke*. Große Stuttgarter Ausgabe, hrsg. v. F. Beißner, Stuttgart 1943–1985, Band II, p. 88.

2 See this volume, p. 37.

the later music seems nevertheless to be characterised essentially by interruption, discontinuity and fracture—phenomena which we associate with fragmentation, rather than with synthesis.

Aphorisms and fragments

One aspect of change in Kurtág's development, represented in this piece, is the transformation of aphorisms into fragments, as early works are dissolved in the larger form of this 'ensemble' piece. Although the two terms—aphorism and fragment—are often conflated, there is a clear distinction to be drawn between them. At the time of Hölderlin and Beethoven (two of the main players in Kurtág's world of references), Schlegel defined his own philosophical fragments in aphoristic terms: "a fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine".³ However, by the twentieth century, the following distinctions had stabilised:

<i>aphorism</i>	"aphorism = the smallest possible whole" (Robert Musil). ⁴
<i>musical aphorism</i>	"the smallest possible whole which seeks to test and reform previously established syntactical norms with such concision that preliminary idea and work become one" (Carola Nielinger). ⁵
<i>fragment</i>	1. a part broken off; a detached piece; 2. an isolated or incomplete part; 3. the remains of an otherwise lost or destroyed whole, esp. the extant remains or unfinished portion of a book or work of art (<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>).

I wish to retain this distinction between aphorism and fragment. The appearance of the earlier microludes for string quartet, op. 13 (1977-78), in *...quasi una fantasia...* demonstrates this process of fragmenting former aphorisms.⁶ Stefan Fricke and Friedrich Spangemacher⁷ list a number of other aspects of *...quasi una fantasia...* that can be traced back to earlier Kurtág works—a foraging activity which has occupied many commentators on Kurtág's music. Through these analyses we observe, on the one hand, a unifying (synthesising) impulse, expressed through the joining of material from various works in one work-context; on the other hand, the fragmentation of an earlier aphorism (phrase-by-phrase, in the case of *...quasi una fantasia...*'s 4th movement) dissolves

3 Friedrich SCHLEGEL: "Fragment 206" in *Athenäum. Eine Zeitschrift von A.W. Schegel und F. Schegel*. Band I, 2, Berlin 1798.

4 Robert MUSIL: *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. A. Frisé, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1978, Band VII, p. 863. Quoted in Carola NIELINGER: *Smallest Possible Wholes: Aphorism as a Recurrent Problem in Musical Construction* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1998), p. 243.

5 Nielinger: *Smallest Possible Wholes*, p. 246.

6 György KURTÁG and Ulrich DIBELIUS: "Meine Gefängniszelle – meine Festung" in *MusikTexte* Nr. 72 (1997), p. 33. The presence of the microludes in *...quasi una fantasia...* is also referred to in Søren Møller Sørensen's article in this volume.

7 Stefan FRICKE and Friedrich SPANGEMACHER: "György Kurtág" in *Komponisten der Gegenwart* 12/98, pp. 8, 12-13.

the formal (aphoristic) identity of earlier pieces and the cycles from which they stem. A general progression, from semi-independent aphorisms arranged in cycles to expanded textures of interwoven fragments, demonstrates processes both of fragmentation and of synthesis. I will suggest that the collecting of diverse material in ...*quasi una fantasia*... produces a kind of paratactic synthesis.

The discussion of fragments and aphorisms touches also on questions of formal openness, and of the mobility of permutational parts. Although permutability is suggested by Kurtág's interest in 'composed' programmes—performing pieces from different aphoristic series interwoven with one another, and with other composers' works (Bach, Schumann, etc.)—the plurality of possible combinations normally associated with truly mobile forms seems to be limited by his complementary practice of fixing particular programme orders, once combined, in many (or all?) successive performances. Thus, genuine formal openness is only displayed in a single work of his *oeuvre*: *Einige Sätze aus den Sudelbüchern Georg Christoph Lichtenbergs*, op. 37 (1997), for solo soprano—a compilation of aphorisms which are to be re-ordered at will by the performer.

References and compositional style

In the following discussion of Hölderlin references I wish to consider how imported references (in this case, from literature) breed Kurtág's compositional style through a constantly evolving system of quotation and intertextuality. Of all the many sources from which Kurtág quotes repeatedly, I focus on a non-musical case (obviously external to Kurtág's own *oeuvre*) in order to point up the chain of idiomatic composerly associations (not audible for the listener) by which Kurtág proceeds from original point of reference to integration within the context of his own work.

Kurtág's derivative habit of recycling material appears in his music at times as an entirely common composerly style-development (favourite motifs and intervals, etc.); but occasionally it tips over into self-consciously deployed quotations written into the score verbally (non-sounding quotes and references appearing in work- and movement-titles, dedications, and so on).

In the case of Hölderlin references in ...*quasi una fantasia*..., the latter strategy is the most obvious, but on the basis of Zoltán Farkas' mapping of what he terms "a Hölderlin topos"⁸ throughout Kurtág's *oeuvre*, we can also observe the former strategy at a musical compositional level.

Why Hölderlin?

Hölderlin's own late work developed in the direction of short forms, fragmentary strophes, and—at the level not only of form, but also of content and style—a general problematisation of language and of communication. Hölderlin's contemporaries, and

8 Zoltán FARKAS: "The path of a Hölderlin topos; wandering ideas in Kurtág's compositions" in *Studia musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 43 (2002) pp. 289-310.

immediately subsequent generations, associated this development almost exclusively with a personal crisis connected with worsening schizophrenia, evaluating his late work negatively; however, Hölderlin's late poetry experienced several strong revivals in the 20th century. The first revival came shortly after the turn of the century, in the 1920s and 1930s, simultaneously with Wittgenstein's problematisation of language and communication, and his appeal for a reduced and purified use of language, together with the revival of literary aphorism in the work of Karl Kraus, Franz Kafka and Robert Musil. On the basis of these and other considerations, Hölderlin's late style came to be regarded as a logical and sophisticated artistic development, a conscious choice of radical style, directed towards precision and deliberately-chosen difficulty. The two positions in the reception of Hölderlin's broken forms—interpreted as crisis or as radical choice—obviously do not exclude one another.⁹ Kurtág's own radically reduced aesthetics are rooted in the two-tone exercises which he developed together with therapist Marianne Stein during his crisis years in the late 1950's.¹⁰

A pattern can be observed in Kurtág's preferences for such 'difficult art' in his choice elsewhere to set texts by Beckett, Kafka and Lichtenberg: masters of fragmentary and brittle articulation, authors who—like Hölderlin—wrote at the edge of languagelessness. Hölderlin, specifically, offers Kurtág allusions to romanticism, to fragmentation and aphorism, to problematised language, and to forms characterised by the dislocation of their parts.

As discussed by Søren Møller Sørensen,¹¹ Kurtág further fragments the section of the poem quoted in the score at the start of the 4th movement of *...quasi una fantasia...*, by omitting the final line and replacing it with an additional '...'. Kurtág augments the text's fragmentary nature by leaving out the final three words which place the artist's role in relation to world and subject. If fragment and aphorism are to be defined as mutually exclusive terms, then there is no doubt here that Kurtág has chosen to see Hölderlin as representing fragmentation.

We know that Kurtág's Hölderlin reference was tacked on to the score after he had finished the piece.¹² As the reference is not evoked for the listener, it is tempting to regard it as superficial to the content of the work. But, as Zoltán Farkas has shown, Hölderlin had been a part of Kurtág's arsenal of references for some years already; Kurtágian Hölderlin references do occur embedded within the music itself, although not accessible to the listener.

9 Further developments in the reception of Hölderlin (including the equally wildly fluctuating political reception) are outlined by Carola NIELINGER-VAKIL in "Quiet Revolutions: Hölderlin fragments by Luigi Nono and Wolfgang Rihm" in *Music & Letters*, vol. 81 (2000), pp. 245-274; see also Thomas RYAN: *Hölderlin's silence*, New York, 1988.

10 Kurtág and Dibelius: "Meine Gefängniszelle...", p. 31.

11 Søren Møller SØRENSEN: "Om nærværene og fraværene i Kurtágs *...quasi una fantasia...*", this volume, p. 33 ff.

12 Christian SCHEIB: "...quasi una fantasia..." in *Positionen* Nr. 2 (1992) pp. 39-40.

Adorno, Hölderlin and Darmstadt

Carola Nielinger-Vakil's study on Hölderlin fragments in the music of Nono and Rihm¹³ traces the influence of Adorno among mid-20th century Darmstadt composers, and couples this with Adorno's role in reevaluating Hölderlin's late work. Adorno was of course influential in Darmstadt, as he lectured there in the 1950's and '60's. His reflections on Hölderlin's mastery of "the intermittent gesture"¹⁴—summed up in the 1963 lecture 'Parataxis'¹⁵—were taken up in the late 1960's by another left-wing intellectual, Pierre Bertaux, who drew a parallel between this aspect of Hölderlin's work and that of Webern. The popularity of Webern in Darmstadt coincided with a reappraisal of Hölderlin, in a celebration of 'difficult' art and artists, and a general problematisation of compositional practice, producing in turn a generation of Darmstadt-originated works associated with Hölderlin (by Pousseur, Holliger, Rihm, Zender, Nono, and Ligeti). Kurtág's own references to Hölderlin began in the 1970's with the Hölderlin study in *Játékok IV* and the song-setting of a Hölderlin text in op. 11.

Adorno had also noted, early in Darmstadt's history, a strict avoidance among composers of referentiality, in favour of the conception of a *tabula rasa* forming the background for illusions of unlimited originality and the complete absence of historical influences. We can regard Kurtág's thematisation of references as belonging to a subsequent backlash of referentiality—an endless process, exhibiting layer upon layer of quotes, palimpsests, transcriptions, stylistic transfers, and so on.

Kurtág, Nono, (Beethoven) and Hölderlin

As noted above the quotation from Hölderlin's "Andenken" which appears in the score of *...quasi una fantasia...* is not evoked for the listener at all (unless perhaps in a programme note). This gesture follows a composerly tradition of evoking 'secret' references for performers, a tradition which is present both in Kurtág's own work (most significantly, in the *Játékok*), and in the most famous example of Hölderlin-devotion in music, Nono's string quartet *Fragmente – Stille: An Diotima* (Nono being himself one of the artists repeatedly paid homage to in Kurtág's scores).

Nono also made the link (already indicated by Adorno)¹⁶ between the two contemporaries Hölderlin and Beethoven (ie. two revolutionary Romantics who rode into reception difficulties in their later years, through the increasing disjunction and fragmentation of their late work). Kurtág further underlines this link by taking a Beethovenian sonata reference as the title of this work,¹⁷ thus joining Hölderlin and Beethoven as verbal references in the score.

But while Nono tracks Hölderlin's fragmentation with interrupted textures of sounds and silences (a series, literally, of fragments), Kurtág's quotation of Hölderlin occurs in

13 Nielinger-Vakil: "Quiet Revolutions...".

14 *Ibid.* p. 246.

15 Theodor W. ADORNO: "Noten zur Literatur" in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 2, Frankfurt, 1974, pp. 447-491.

16 *Ibid.* pp. 456, 473.

17 See Sørensen: "Om nærværene og fraværene...", this volume, p. 33.

a work which seems—at least in comparison with his earlier production—to seek fluency. Nono was moving from large-scale, dramatic works to a radically reduced, classically ‘abstract’ universe—in the sense of the string quartet as one of the purest forms of chamber music; Kurtág was moving gradually outward, as already noted, from aphoristic series of small-scale works (songs, piano pieces, string quartet-movements) to tackling larger ensembles.

Kurtág’s Hölderlin style

Zoltán Farkas traces in considerable detail the development of Hölderlin references as a stylistic trait in Kurtág’s career, following related musical figures as they unfold from the 1970s through the *oeuvre* of the 1980s.¹⁸ If we apply Farkas’ basic observations to *...quasi una fantasia...*, we can find traces of his proposed motivic and textural ‘Hölderlin *topos*’.¹⁹ Febrile *crescendi* and *decrescendi* (2nd movement); tightly-packed dissonances oscillating around a central tone (2nd movement); fragmented endings (1st, 2nd and 4th movement); funnel-shaped dynamic progression (2nd movement); progressively increasing density of texture (2nd movement); interlinked chiming major 7th and minor 9th dissonances (3rd movement); the coupling of a *dies iræ* character with the indication “grave, disperato” (3rd movement), and finally; the oppositional relation between this *disperato* and the following *lontano* (4th movement).

However, what Farkas omits to comment on is the leap from text to music in Kurtág’s composerly assumptions about his own music. What makes this a ‘Hölderlin *topos*’, other than that the composer repeatedly couples Hölderlin with his music? The stylistic development of these motifs, intervals and characteristic couplings seems unconnected to any transferral of *essential* qualities of Hölderlin’s poetry into Kurtág’s music; there is, arguably, no obvious or unambiguous translation into music—at a *motivic* level—of the qualities of the aphoristic texts being ‘set’ or referred to in the music.

The characteristics which Farkas finds typical of Kurtág’s ‘Hölderlin *topos*’ seem difficult to relate to Hölderlin in any systematically motivic fashion, and the arbitrariness of their appearances in *...quasi una fantasia...* evoke, at most, references to Kurtág’s own compositional thumbprints. Compared with the concreteness of the literary quotation in the score, motivic elements dissolve into Kurtág’s private web of stylistic self-references.

One could make a similar investigation of Schumann references in *...quasi una fantasia...*. If the result were to resemble Friedemann Sallis’ discussion of Schumann references in Kurtág’s *Hommage à R. Sch.*, op. 15d (1990),²⁰ then it would be appropriate to conclude that the majority of references refer primarily back to Kurtág’s own production and only indirectly to Schumann’s turbulent, romantic disposition and the general romantic project characterised by a new consciousness towards historical repertoire, the

18 Farkas: “The path of a Hölderlin *topos* ...”.

19 Farkas uses the term ‘*topos*’ instead of, for example, ‘*motif*’, to cover a phenomenon which he considers to display motivic, intervallic, dynamic, gestural, textural and structural characteristics.

20 Friedemann SALLIS: “The genealogy of György Kurtág’s *Hommage à R. Sch.*, op. 15d” in *Studia musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43 (2002), pp. 311-322.

upgrading of irrational aspects of artistic language, and the relation between the individual and his surroundings (captured, in *...quasi una fantasia...*, in the physical and musical isolation of the piano soloist).

What kind of synthesis?

I have already expressed reservations about talking of formal openness in through-composed textures. But where the level of fragmentation is so high, it seems equally inappropriate to posit a project of closure. To the extent that the disparate fragments are integrated at all, how are they synthesised?

Undoubtedly, Kurtág does connect, combine and compose separate elements and ideas into some kind of a whole. But the binding is not a systematic synthesis; rather, it threads together relationships in an open-ended web, where continuity is not the same as synthesis. Freely associating across a broad field of memory-objects does not of itself create structural integration of those independent parts. But an organic cyclical development effects a certain intertwining of *topoi*. I propose that this practice is paratactic in the sense described by Adorno in relation to Hölderlin's late work: (i) 'artificial disturbances that evade the logical hierarchy of a subordinating syntax', and; (ii) the 'tendency to mix eras together, to connect things that are remote and unconnected'.

A simple illustration of the kind of paratactic synthesis at work in *...quasi una fantasia...* concerns the re-spatialisation of musicians. Seen as a point in Kurtág's compositional development, we observe the collecting of several small instrumental groups as typified in Kurtág's previous works in one common space, with a resultant (partial) synthesis of both sound and material, through this simultaneity. Considered separately from the rest of Kurtág's *oeuvre*, however, the audience experiences a strong gesture of fragmentation, arising from the distribution of musicians from the large ensemble throughout the auditorium.

Interestingly, the fate of early aphoristic elements in later developments in Kurtág's *oeuvre* follows a similar curve as within, say, the fourth movement of *...quasi una fantasia...*, where each phrase, once first deployed in simplicity, seems to echo, constantly unfolding, broadening out and invading a larger space, often disappearing as recognised patterns, in rings of hesitancy, vacillation, and a certain kind of open-endedness (question, answer, silence, hesitation).

The practice of additionally fragmenting former aphorisms and inserting these fragments into a common large-scale context dissolves the borders of previously self-contained units, causing formerly autonomous parts to overlap in patterns of interdependence and mutual reference.

In conclusion: both literary and musical aphorisms lend themselves through their inherent permutability to development within larger-scale forms, but remain thanks to their own "sense of closure, obtrusive independence and exemplary character"²¹ resistant

21 Nielinger-Vakil: "Quiet Revolutions...", p. 258.

to true integration in a holistic whole. Compositional manoeuvres of fragmentation operate even more disruptively to ensure that inconclusiveness wins over conventional 'development'. It is this strategy of avoiding definitive closure, whilst nevertheless combining disparate elements into some form of collected identity, which prompts me to call the kind of synthesis at work in ...*quasi una fantasia*... paratactic. Further, I propose that Kurtág's strategy is sensitive to paratactic strategies in the late poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin (at the level of embedding authorly associations—'intended meanings'—which are simultaneously referred to and withheld). So, although I find the transfer between works of a motivic 'Hölderlin *topos*', as suggested by Farkas, unconvincing at all but a stylistic level, I propose a link at an aesthetic level between Kurtág's compositional strategies and the work of his dedicatee Hölderlin.²²

22 My thanks to Carola Nielinger-Vakil and Jens Hesselager for their careful reading and advice in connection with this article.