

Today's program

SETH KNOPP, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Yellow Barn

Summer Residency Concert

August 7, 2020 | 7:30 | The Big Barn, Putney, VT

György Kurtág (b.1926) Kafka Fragments (1987)

Tony Arnold, Elaine Daiber, Lucy Fitz Gibbon, sopranos; Alice Ivy-Pemberton, Adelya Nartadjieva, Mark Steinberg, violins

Texts and Translations

György Kurtág (b. 1926)

Kafka-Fragmente, Op. 24 (1985–1987)

Texts by Franz Kafka

I. Teil

1. Die Guten gehn im gleichen Schritt...

Die Guten gehn im gleichen Schritt. Ohne von ihnen zu wissen, tanzen die anderen um sie die Tänze der Zeit.

2. Wie ein Weg im Herbst

Wie ein Weg im Herbst: Kaum ist er rein gekehrt, bedeckt er sich wieder mit den trockenen Blättern.

3. Verstecke

Verstecke sind unzählige, Rettung nur eine, aber Möglichkeiten der Rettung wieder so viele wie Verstecke.

4. Ruhelos

5. Berceuse I

Schlage deinen Manel, hoher Traum, um das Kind.

6. Nimmermehr (Excommunicatio)

Nimmermehr, nimmermehr kehrst du wieder die Städte, nimmermehr tönt die grosse Glocke über dir.

7. »Wenn er mich immer fragt«

»Wenn er mich immer fragt.« Das ä, losgelöst vom Satz, flog dahin wie ein Ball auf der Wiese.

8. Es zupfte mich jemand am Kleid

Es zupfte mich jemand am Kleid, aber ich schüttelte ihn ab.

Part I

1. The good march in step...

The good march in step. Unaware of them, the others dance around them the dances of time.

2. Like a pathway in autumn

Like a pathway in autumn: hardly has it been swept clean, it is covered again with dry leaves.

3. Hiding places

There are countless hiding places, but only one slavation; but then again, there are as many paths to salvation as there are hiding places.

4. Restless

5. Berceuse I

Wrap your overcoat, O lofty dream, around the child.

6. Nevermore (Excommunicatio)

Nevermore, nevermore will you return to the cities, nevermore will the great bell resound above you.

7. “But he won’t stop asking me.”

“But he won’t stop asking me.” That “ah,” detached from the second sentence, flew away like a ball across the meadow.

8. Someone tugged at my clothes

Someone tugged at my clothes but I shrugged him off.

9. Die Weissnäherinnen

Die Weissnäherinnen in den Regengüssen.

10. Szene am Bahnhof

Die Zuschauer erstarren, wenn der Zug vorbeifahrt.

11. Sonntag, den 19. Juli 1910 (Berceuse II) (Homage à Jeney)

Geschlafen, aufgewacht, geschlafen, aufgewacht, elendes Leben.

12. Meine Ohrmuschel...

Meine Ohrmuschel fühlte sich frisch, rauh, saltig an wie ein Blatt.

13. Einmal brach ich mir das Bein (Chassidischer Tanz)

Einmal brach ich mir das Bei, es war das schönste Erlebnis meines Lebens.

14. Umpanzert

Einen Augenblick lang fühlte ich mich umpanzert.

15. Zwei Spazierstücke (Authentisch-Plagal)

Auf Balzacs Spazierstockgriff: Ich breche all Hindernisse. Aufmeinem: Mich brechen alle Hindernisse. Gemeinsam ist das »alle.«

16. Keine Rückkehr

Von einem gewissen Punkt an gibt es keine Rückkehr mehr. Dieser Punkt ist zu erreichen.

17. Stolze (1910/15 November, zehn Uhr)

Ich werde mich nicht müde werden lassen. Ich werde in meine Novelle hineinspringen und wenn es mir das Gesicht zerscheiden sollte.

9. The seamstresses

The seamstresses in the downpourings.

10. Scene at the station

The onlookers freeze as the train goes past.

11. Sunday, 19th July 1910 (Berceuse II) (Homage to Jeney)

Slept, woke, slept, woke, miserable life.

12. My ear...

My ear felt fresh to the touch, rough, cool, juicy, like a leaf.

13. Once I broke my leg (Hasidic dance)

Once I broke my leg: it was the most wonderful experience of my life.

14. Enarmored

For a moment I felt enarmored.

15. Two walking-sticks (Authentic-plagal)

On the stock of Balzac’s walking-stick: “I surmount all obstacles.” On mine: “All obstacles surmount me.” They have that “all” in common.

16. No going back

From a certain point on, there is no going back. That is the point to reach.

17. Pride (15th November 1910, 10 o’clock)

I will not let myself be made tired. I will dive into my story even if that should lacerate my face.

**18. Träumend hing die Blume
(Hommage à Schumann)**

Träumend hing die Blume am hohen Stengel.
Abenddämmerung umzog sie.

19. Nichts dergleichen

Nichts dergleichen, nichts dergleichen.

II. Teil

**1. Der wahre Weg
(Hommage-message à Pierre Boulez)**

Der Wahre Weg geht über ein Seil, das nicht in der Höhe gespannt ist, sondern knapp über den Boden. Es scheint mehr bestimmt, stolpern zu machen, als begangen zu werden.

III. Teil

1. Haben? Sein?

Es gibt kein Habe, nur ein Sein, nur ein nach letztem Atem, nach Ersticken verlangendes Sein.

**2. Der Coitus als Bestrafung
(Canticulum Mariæ Magdalanaë)**

Der Coitus als Bestrafung des Glückes des Beisammenseins.

3. Meine Gefängniszelle

Meine Gefängniszelle, meine Festung.

4. Schmutzig bin ich, Milená...

Schmutzig bin ich, Milená, endlos schmutzig, darum mache ich ein solches Gerede mit der Reinheit. Niemand singt so rein als die, welche in der tiefsten Hölle sind; was wir für den Gesang der Engle halten, ist ihr Gesang.

**18. The flower hung dreamily
(Homage to Schumann)**

The flower hung dreamily on its tall stem. Dusk enveloped it.

19. Nothing of the kind

Nothing of the kind, nothing of the kind.

Part II

**1. The true path
(Homage-message to Pierre Boulez)**

The true path goes by way of a rope that is suspended not high up, but rather just above the ground. Its purpose seems to be more to make one stumble than to be walked on.

Part III

1. To have? to be?

There is no "to have," only a "to be," a "to be" longing for the last breath, for suffocation.

**2. Coitus as punishment
(Canticulum Mariæ Magdalanaë)**

Coitus as punishment of the happiness of being together.

3. My fortress

My prison cell, my fortress.

4. I am dirty, Milená...

I am dirty, Milená, endlessly dirty, that is why I make such a fuss about cleanliness. None sing as purely as those in deepest Hell; it is their singing that we take for the singing of Angels.

5. Elendes Leben (Double)

Geschlafen, aufgewacht, geschlafen, aufgewacht,
elendes Leben.

6. Der begrenzte Kreis

Der begrenzte Kreis ist rein.

7. Ziel, Weg, Zögern

Es gibt ein Ziel, aber keinen Weg; was wir Weg nennen, ist Zögern.

8. So fest

So fest wie die Hand den Stein hält. Sie hält ihn aber fest, nur um ihn desto weiter zu werfen. Aber auch in jene Weite führt der Weg.

9. Penetrant jüdisch

Im Kampf zwischen dir und der Welt sekundiere der Welt.

10. Verstecke (Double)

Verstecke sind unzählige, Rettung nur eine, aber Möglichkeiten der Rettung wieder so viele wie Verstecke.

11. Staunend sahen wir das Grosse Pferd

Staunend sahen wir das grosse Pferd. Es durchbrach das Dach unserer Stube. Der bewölkte Himmel zog sich schwach entlang des gewaltigen Umrisses, und rauschend flog die Mähne im Wind.

12. Szene in der Elektrischen, 1910 (»Ich bat im Traum die Tänzerin Eduardowa, sie möchte doch den Csárdás noch einmal tanzen.«)

Die Tänzerin Eduardowa, eine Liebhaberin der Musik, fährt wie überall so auch in der Elektrischen in Begleitung zweier Violinisten, die sie Häufig spielen läßt. Denn es besteht kein Verbot, warum in der Elektrischen

5. Miserable life (Double)

Slept, woke, slept, woke, miserable life.

6. The closed circle

The closed circle is pure.

7. Destination, path, hesitation

There is a destination, but no path to it; what we call a path is hesitation.

8. As tightly

As tightly as the hand holds the stone. It holds it so tight only to cast it as far off as it can. Yet even that distance the path will reach.

9. Offensively Jewish

In the struggle between yourself and the world, side with the world.

10. Hiding places (Double)

There are countless hiding places, but only one salvation; but then again, there are as many paths to salvation as there are hiding places.

11. Amazed, we saw the great horse

Amazed, we saw the great horse. It broke through the ceiling of our room. The cloudy sky scudded weakly along its mighty silhouette as its mane streamed in the wind.

12. Scene on a tram, 1910 ("In a dream I asked the dancer Eduardowa if she would kindly dance the csárdás once more.")

The dancer Eduardowa, a music lover, travels everywhere, even on the tram, in the company of two violinists whom she frequently calls upon to play. For there is no ban on playing on the tram, provided the playing is good, it is

nicht gespielt werden dürfte, wenn das Spiel gut, den Mitfahrenden angenehm ist und nichts kostet, das heisst, wenn nachher nicht eingesammelt wird. Es ist allerdings im Anfang ein wenig überraschend, und ein Weilchen lang findet jeder, es sei unpassend. Aber bei voller Fahrt, starkem Luftzug und stiller Gasse klingt es hübsch.

IV. Teil

1. Zu spät (22. Oktober 1913)

Zu spät. Die Süssigkeit der Trauer und der Liebe. Von ihr angelächelt werden im Boot. Das war das Allerschönste. Immer nur das Verlangen, zu sterben und das Sich-noch-Halten, das allein ist Liebe.

2. Eine lange Geschichte

Ich sehe einem Mädchen in die Augen, und es war eine sehflange Liebesgeschichte mit Donner und Küssen und Blitz. Ich lebe rasch.

3. In memoriam Robert Klein

Noch spielen die Jagdhunde im Hof, aber das Wild entgeht ihnen nicht, so dehr es jetzt schon durch die Wälder jagt.

4. Aus einem alten Notizbuch

Jetzt am Abend, nachdem ich von sechs Uhr früh an geiernt habe, bemerkte ich, wie meine linke Hand die rechte schon ein Weilchen lang aus Mitleid bei den Fingern umfasst hielt.

5. Leoparden

Leoparden brechen in den Tempel ein und saufen die Opferkürge leer; das wiederholt sich immer wieder; schliesslich kann man es vorausberechnen, und es wird ein Teil der Zeremonie.

pleasing to the other passengers, and it is free of charge, that is to say, the hat is not passed around afterwards. However, it is initially somewhat surprsing, and for a little while everyone considers it unseemly. But at full speed, with a powerful current of air, and in a quiet street, it sounds nice.

Part IV

1. Too late (22nd October 1913)

Too late. The sweetness of sorrow and of love. To be smiled at by her in a row-boat. That was the most wonderful of all. Always just the yearning to die and the surviving, that alone is love.

2. A long story

I look a girl in the eye and it was a very long love story with thunder and kisses and lightning. I live fast.

3. In memoriam Robert Klein

Though the hounds are still in the courtyard, the fame will not escape, no matter how they race through the woods.

4. From an old notebook

Now, in the evening, having studied since six in the morning, I notice that my left hand has for some time been gripping the fingers of my right in commiseration.

5. Leopards

Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial jugs dry; this is repeated, again and again, until it is possible to calculatate in advance when they will come, and it becomes part of the ceremony.

6. In memoriam Johannis Pilinszky

Ich kann...nicht eigentlich erzählen, ja fast nicht einmal reden; wenn ich erzähle, habe ich meistens ein Gefühl, wie es kleine Kinder haben könnten, die die ersten Gehversuche machen.

7. Wiederum, wiederum

Wiederum, wiederum, weit verbannt, weit verbannt. Berge, Wüste, weites Land gilt es zu durchwandern.

8. Es blendete uns die Mondnacht

Es blendete uns die Mondnacht. Vögel schrien von Baum zu Baum. In den Feldern sauste es. Wie krochen durch den Staub ein Schlangenpaar.

6. In memoriam Johannis Pilinszky

I can't actually...tell a story, in fact I am almost unable even to speak; when I try to tell it, I usually feel the way small children might when they try to take their first steps.

7. Again, again

Again, again, exiled far away, exiled far away. Mountains, desert, a vast country to be wandered through.

8. The moonlit night dazzled us

The moonlit night dazzled us. Birds shrieked in the trees. There was a rush of wind in the fields. We crawled through the dust, a pair of snakes.

Program Notes

In a diary entry from 1910, Franz Kafka wrote, “Together with Blei, his wife and child, from time to time listened to myself outside myself, it sounded like the whimpering of a young cat.” That witty fragment, a few unconnected clauses, is the entirety of his entry. Kafka’s diary is filled with notes to himself, small inspirations, material he couldn’t bear to forget. Kafka meant for his diary to be destroyed after his death, but his friend Max Brod ignored his wishes and published them in 1939. As such, readers glimpse a Kafka who was supposed to stay in private. His wit, irony, and sarcasm are familiar as traits that mark his artistic style; his ability to notice the tragically ridiculous sets him apart from anyone else. Kafka knew that it is the artist’s job to step outside himself, to notice how ridiculous he sounds. Only then can he begin to inventively comment on the world around him.

György Kurtág looked to Kafka’s unique brand of honesty as a lifelong source of inspiration. He first received a copy of Kafka’s diaries as a young man from his composer friend György Ligeti. However, it was not until much later that Kurtág used Kafka’s words in his music. *Kafka Fragments* for soprano and violin was written between 1985 and 1987, when Kurtág was already sixty-years-old. This song cycle is comprised of fragments in a double sense: first, in that each setting of the text is so brief to begin with, and second, in that Kurtág lifted only the entries from Kafka’s journal that were most meaningful to him. They are the compression of somebody else’s shorthand. By internalizing Kafka’s words and making them his own, Kurtág once again turns these settings into something uncomfortably personal and hauntingly beautiful.

As a notoriously slow writer, Kurtág marked the title-page of the *Kafka Fragments* with a joke: “Promise to Zoltán Kocsis: there will be a piano concerto.” This inscription alludes to the fact that in 1985, when Kurtág started work on the *Kafka Fragments*, he was deep in the laborious process of writing a piano concerto with over sixty pages of sketches (to this day it remains unfinished). However, he got caught up in his vision for the *Kafka Fragments*, stating that, “almost by accident I began to sketch the music to a few of the selected texts, like a little boy relishing a forbidden treat.” At the

same time that this music sounds so natural, it tests the limits of the human body. The soprano who premiered the piece, Adrienne Csengery, was known for her uniquely large range, and as Kurtág said of the gifted violinist András Keller, “I sometimes think: Keller has proven to me that *Kafka* is a work of genius.”

Writing in a time when very few Hungarian composers achieved international fame because of world politics, it makes sense that Kurtág followed in the musical footsteps of his compatriot Bartók. In a typically Bartókian fashion, Kurtág’s music is evolutionary rather than revolutionary. His connection to music and composers of the past is always clear. In *Kafka Fragments*, one can hear whispers of Webern’s brevity, Bartók’s folk influence, Schumann’s Eusebius and Florestan, and Schubert’s aching and wandering song cycles. Unlike Bartók, Kurtág travelled to France for a year in 1957 to receive instruction from Messiaen, Milhaud, and Max Deutsch. Although these composers had an impact on Kurtág’s music, it was the art psychologist Marianne Stein who left a truly lasting impression. In the way she inspired Kurtág to assign himself concrete, manageable tasks to creatively connect one note to another, she helped him develop his unique voice. *Kafka Fragments* is dedicated to her.

—Annie Jacobs Perkins

Franz Kafka was born on July 3, 1883, into a German-speaking Jewish family in Prague, the capital of the Czech Lands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He died at the age of 41 with the dubious luck of one who died too soon to experience the Nazi terror. His three sisters, Gabriela, Valeria, and Ottila; his second fiancée, Julie Wohryzek; and his lover, Milena Jesenská, a brilliant Czech writer, were all murdered in concentration camps. Though Kafka fell in love easily, and was easily loved, he never married—despite his having been engaged three times, twice to the same woman, Felice Bauer. Felice survived the terror and left a voluminous collection of Kafka’s letters, testimony to her courtship by one of the century’s strangest cavaliers: Kafka was as eloquent in his charm as he was insistent on his unsuitability. Kafka broke off his second engagement to Felice after he had contracted tuberculosis, which in the end consumed his larynx and caused him

excruciating pain, so that he could barely speak. Like the hero of his story “A Starvation Artist,” he literally starved to death.

He lived his life under intense self-scrutiny and, especially in the later years, with great moral precision. His many friends testify to his unfailing courtesy, good humor, readiness to help—and exquisite phrasing. In response to his bullying father’s complaint that his behavior was “crazy, meshuggah, not normal,” Kafka replied, “Not being normal is not the worst thing. What’s normal, for example, is world war.”

Kafka’s moral qualities only added to the attractiveness of his person: he was a handsome man, some six feet tall, athletic, and at 135 pounds able to wear beautiful clothes to advantage. He was much valued for these qualities, as well as for his lawyerly brilliance, especially at the Workmen’s Accident Insurance Institute of the Czech Lands, where he rose to a high official position, becoming Senior Legal Secretary shortly before his death; and yet all the substantial good he did there could never amount to his justification. He read voraciously in seven languages, thought intensely, cared passionately for the welfare of Jewish refugees, and even pursued carpentry and gardening seriously, but the path he took—and to judge from his posthumous fame, found—was, with indirections, the way of writing. Only a few of his stories were published in his lifetime, and the novels for which he is most famous—*Amerika: The Missing Person*; *The Trial*; and *The Castle*—appeared after his death. But from the “enormous world I have in my head,” from his traffic with spirits to darkness bound, he has enriched and frightened our imagination with imperishable figures like Gregor Samsa, who wakes up to find himself transformed into a verminous beetle; Joseph K., accused of a nameless crime for which he is stabbed to death in a quarry; the prisoner who lies down on a torture machine to have his sentence inscribed in his flesh; the prétendu land surveyor lost in the snow and desperately seeking entrance to the Castle, and countless others.

—Stanley Corngold