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The Research of Contemporary Music: An Analytical ‘Hovercraft’? Colindă Baladă by György Kurtág – A Case Study

ABSTRACT

Background

By its complexity, contemporary music becomes a challenge for any researcher, whose analytical ‘toolkit’ needs to be constantly perfected, adapted, and refined according to the requirements of the new scores. Composed in 2009, the piece *Colinda Baladă* fully illustrates this point and could be regarded as an ideal case study; stylistically heterogeneous and formally less coherent at first glance, designed in a modular form whose constituent parts seem unconnected with one another, György Kurtág’s choral work remains hermetic if approached with a single-sided method.

With which analytical tools could then the present-day researcher approach such a contemporary work, especially one which does not fit any classical framework and whose coherence is not easily discernible from the beginning?

The musical source of inspiration of the piece is picked by Kurtág, as musicologist Francisc László pointed out (László 2009, 41–2), from ‘the Old Testament of Romanian *colinda* research book’, referring, of course, to Bartók’s collection *Rumanian Folk Music: Carols and Christmas Songs (Colinde)* (Bartók 1975, 52). Departing from a folk tune heard by Bartók in 1913 in the village of Păucinești (Hunedoara region), the piece displays, in a kaleidoscopic way, the highly prismatic aspect of his entire oeuvre (Example 1).

A II. c)

Tempo giusto

9. 14a. Ple - cat - o, ple - ca - tu pa - ter - ni - cu soa - re,

10. 15a. Ioi Domnu-lui Doamne! Pu - ter - ni - cu soa - re, că el să să'n - soa - re,

Păucinești (Hunedoara), Petruț Dăbucean (27), 26, XII. 1913.

Ex. 1. Béla Bartók, *Rumanian Folk Music*, vol. IV, *Carols and Christmas Songs (Colinde)*, edited by Benjamin Suchoff, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1975, p. 52.

The technical mastery of this work is matched by the richness of its semantic layers and complex formal design. Echoing in certain respects Bartók’s brilliant *Cantata Profana*, Kurtág’s piece takes the Romanian *colinda* a stage further as its source of inspiration, both in terms of structure and musical substance. The score is packed with dramaturgical indications; scattered throughout the text are sometimes subtle, sometimes overt allusions to Wagner’s *Tristan* (‘pseudo-*Tristan*’), or Gesualdo (‘*ppp* di Gesualdo’), together with outright quotations of folk

melodies, all of which signpost the stylistically divergent segments of the piece. All these indications are adding up in the score carefully responding to each suggestion of the text in the form of cutaways and flashbacks, challenging the researcher to constantly search semiotic correspondences in a vast musical universe.

By simultaneously evoking both an archaic and a contemporary mood, contained within a manifestly epic structure, *Colindă Baladă* epitomises Kurtág’s unique style. Rather than featuring postmodernism and intertextuality, it plots a complex poetic labyrinth which seems incomprehensible in itself, but which displays a meta-coherence within Kurtág’s entire oeuvre.

But in order to screen the piece in all its complexity and to decode the hidden associations, the researcher needs to employ sophisticated analytical tools, in which ethnomusicology, aesthetics, semiotics, sketch studies, and form analysis blend together, forming a hovercraft that allows navigation across disparate terrains. Armed with such a refined ‘spectrometer’, the researcher is enabled not only to translate the piece into a chart, but also to bring to the surface its multi-dimensional scaling.

Kurtág’s concern for the significance and poetic content of the words is present in this piece almost in an *Augenmusik* manner, as the melodic lines become imaginary pencils, which draw musical correspondences between verbal images and sonorous design. Melodic lines and sounds become illustrative devices ensuring figurative translations of the textual significance: horses getting tired represented by descending melodic contour and rhythmic dissolution; building the stairs by a series of upward interlaced melodic lines; the wax priest melting away by descending lines and glissandi; Moon rising and sun setting by ascending and descending melodic lines — as an *anabasis-katabasis* projection.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

The analyst’s main objective is to bring to the surface and to show the logic of the discourse. The ultimate cohesion of Kurtág’s music should be looked for, not necessarily inside the piece itself, but rather within the whole context of his oeuvre, which emerges as a complex poly-stylistic web. For that manner it is fundamental to broaden the analytical space and ‘zoom out’ in order to place the piece in question into the context of the composer’s entire catalogue of compositions.

The keyword in understanding the piece and also the composer’s overall oeuvre is contained in the *colinda* text and is expressed by the verb ‘to weave’ (Example 2).

Ex. 2. György Kurtág, *Colindă-Baladă*, Tenor's Aria: 'Weave, Ana, weave', bb. 119–22.

Kurtág is practically weaving a net of symbols inside his own piece, connecting it with the musical world of other composers, in form of faded allusion, but in the meantime the piece is itself woven into the bigger web of his own oeuvre, as it resonates with other pieces of the Kurtágian constellation, apart from *Duo for violins Op. 45* or *Concertante*. Berceuse genre and its iambic rhythm is also present in *Kafka fragments* and in *...pas à pas. Nulle part*, the idea of alluding to Renaissance composers was present in *Hommage à R. Sch.* Op. 15d (1990) for clarinet, viola and piano, where the last movement evoked a rhythmic pattern inspired by Machaut. As well as the choral-like moments remind the *Apocryphal hymn (in the style of Alfred Schnittke)* from *Játékok V*. Also melodic designs such as the moon and sun one raising one setting can be spotted in *...pas à pas. Nulle part*, projecting new meanings on those fragments of his *Colindă Baladă*, unfolding a rich semiotic space for the analyst.

The verb to weave allows the researcher to detect the mastery of the composer in crafting a tapestry of signs and messages. Echoes of the music by other composers are present, some of them as in a reverted semiotic mirror or just as the backside of the tapestry is showing the same design in an opposite chromatic version. We can detect in Ana's weaving in the colinda text a reversed connection with Penelope. While the latter wove in order to fill a gap (the absence of Ulysses), Ana is required to weave in order to accelerate the union. The nine horses slowing down are opposed to the galloping horse of Schubert's *Erlkönig*, rushing to save the child's life. The melodic design of bb. 218–19 sounds strikingly similar to the end of Schoenberg's *Der Kranke Mond* from *Pierrot lunaire*. Is the composer by any chance sending us a codified message that he is portraying a sick sun (*Die kranke Sonne*)? The fragments alluding to Gesualdo (*ppp di Gesualdo*) do evoke the aura of the Renaissance composer's chromatic madrigals. But the fragment is in clear contrast with one of the most diatonic

madrigals of this author, a piece speaking about the unhappiness of someone for whom the sun does not shine anymore: *Chiaro risplender suole* from Book 6.

Methods

The complexity of the selected piece itself requires instead of a single way of approach, a whole set of methods: analytical, historical, ethnographic, comparative, critical, and hermeneutic, all of which shed light on the intersection of components defining the rich and complex musical discourse of Kurtág's work.

Implications

Alternating between an archaic and contemporary state within a manifestly epic structure, *Colindă-Baladă* operates in a dualistic manner: as a return in time, but also as a projection beyond time. If the audition of the piece provides a clue about this duality, the analysis itself, based on 'amphibious' tools will fully prove and decode the compositional mechanism by which the composer achieved such an intriguing sonorous outcome.

Keywords

Kurtág, Bartók, Intertextuality, Romanian Folk Music, Colinda, Analytical Tools.

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