
Kurtág's *Fin de partie*

Pierre Audi

*Samuel Beckett:
Fin de partie*
di György Kurtág.
Allestimento firmato
da Pierre Audi, le scene
e i costumi sono
di Christof Hetzer,
le luci sono
di Urs Schönebaum.
Da qui a pagina 105,
alcune immagini
delle prove al Teatro
alla Scala, novembre 2018
(Foto Marco Brescia
e Rudy Amisano).

A Beckett opera and its fate against all odds

Samuel Beckett was somewhat adamant that his famous stage works should not be put to music. Not surprisingly: they are in themselves music to be brought to life by actors. Beckett did write one text though which he once posted unexpectedly to the composer Morton Feldman who had begged him (unsuccessfully he thought!) to write a libretto for him. This resulted in a bold opera entitled *Neither* for solo voice and large orchestra. Feldman handed me this score at the end of the 80s and proposed I direct it. He died unexpectedly three months later. As a homage to Feldman I chose to direct this piece in 1991 in my first season in Amsterdam as Artistic Director of Dutch National Opera. The sets were by Jannis Kounellis with Reri Grist as the soprano conducted by Oliver Knussen. Since then the fascinating subject of Beckett and music started many questions in my head...

György Kurtág and I had met in London back in the 80s thanks to Claudio Abbado. The latter was at the time Chief Conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra and was looking for a chamber venue to present chamber music related to Mahler, the composer at the centre of a large project Abbado was leading at the Barbican in London. Kurtág's works on the other hand, needed an intimate theatre and the Almeida Theatre which I founded a few years earlier proved the perfect setting for his music. We became friends without knowing that only three years later I would be asked to lead Dutch National Opera.

What I discovered on taking up the job was that Kurtág had agreed to a commission to write his first opera for Amsterdam but had sadly decided a few weeks before I was announced, that he could not after all write it and returned his fee to the great disappointment of everyone. I tried to persuade him to change his mind but he persisted in saying no. I found Alfred Schnittke at the time to take his place.

However our discussions continued until the mid 90s when the Kurtágs moved to Amsterdam for a few years where they visited every opera premiere. I thought I could make another few attempts to reopen the subject of an opera but those attempts also failed. What started emerging though was Beckett's

oeuvre as a powerful magnet for the composer, resulting in an impressive chamber work for voice and ensemble but no opera. Perhaps a collage of pieces one day Kurtág seemed to suggest?... but not an opera. No thank you.

Jump nearly fifteen years later and Alexander Pereira, a man who knows how not to take no for an answer, persuaded Kurtág to start composing an opera on arguably Beckett's greatest work *Fin de Partie*. From one development to another - too complex to retell - from Salzburg to Milan to *Fin de partie* Amsterdam, I found myself miraculously reconnected to this extraordinary utopic dream that astonishingly became over a period of eight years, an absolute reality. After La Scala, a historic house with a distinguished history of world premieres, Amsterdam will get to experience the opera it once commissioned before this piece starts its journey as one of the first masterpieces of the opera repertoire of the XXI century.

The task of a composer in turning a theatrical masterpiece into an opera

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the general consensus has it that Verdi's *Otello* is a more effective work for the stage than Shakespeare's original play. To achieve this Verdi and his librettist had to somewhat "betray" the author in order to end up doing him full justice. And so it went with Shakespeare with later operatic adaptations such as Aribert Reimann's *Re Lear* and Thomas Ades' *The Tempest*.

In all those cases the operatic adaptation was only imaginable through the rewriting of a completely new text.

Not since those historic operatic adaptations and those of Alban Berg of Büchner and Wedekind (also free adaptations) has an iconic masterpiece of world literature been turned into an opera until Kurtág's *Fin de Partie*. This time though, the composer had decided to set the original Beckett text word for word and unedited, treating the words as dramatic poetry as did Schubert, Schumann, in their song cycles by writers such as Heinrich Heine and others. Still this radical method constitutes an operatic first.

Kurtág's decision to respect the text by not adapting the play was a highly risky decision. It meant that he was going to compose an extended recitative, sung-spoken and enriched by a highly colorful orchestral accompaniment with occasional passages of music without words.

Where this decision "betrays" the original conception of the play is that it turns it into an emotional existential drama which builds to a powerful tragic *climax*. Where Beckett imagined his words spoken fast and often casually, Kurtág dwells on every nuance, repeated words, to delve deep in the souls of the four characters of the play. This elevates the message of the play but it does it in a method which in effect contradicts Beckett's own.

By writing scenes with endings and by preceding the drama by a prologue that sets a Beckett poem to music, the composer frees us from making comparisons with the original. It also implied that I needed to think of a new way to show the "refuge", the home of Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell. Every scene in our production shows this refuge from a different perspective mirroring a

scene of the play as yet not composed by Kurtág: *le tour du monde*, when Hamm makes Clov explore the room as a journey round the Globe.

Staging the opera called for a reinvention of a world intended by Beckett as devoid of hope, inside-outside, and identity. The characters though survive the changes and share their ordeals with the dignity, the sense of humor, the compassion and ruthlessness that Beckett engraves in every word they speak.

After seven weeks rehearsing this complex score one comes to realize that Kurtág did in his own way what Verdi had done to *Otello*: he rethought its subtext and amplified its lyricism allowing music to speak for the psyche of protagonists and thus removed the encryption that keeps emotion at bay when you watch *Fin de partie* as a play performed by actors. And for Kurtág and in many respects, for us today, by letting a new truth emerge in the process, the composer is doing full justice to the soul of the piece and showing its timeless relevance in a new light.

At least this is the debate that a bold work such as *Fin de partie*, the opera, will inevitably ignite.

Milan, November 2018



Foto Brescia e Amisano