

Paul Griffiths

# Eötvös and Kurtág - with a Difference

New Budapest Music Center Releases

The first syllable of Peter Eötvös's name has to be imagined with an accent gently flickering over it, for here is a musician who has made his name - or remade his name - largely in western Europe while keeping some sense of himself as Hungarian. One token of that is his fondness for the cimbalom, which features not only in his virtual concerto *Psychocosmos* (1993) but also in a longer and broader orchestral score, *Atlantis* (1995), where a baritone and a boy soprano are like Prospero and Ariel in a sea of sounds. In *Atlantis*, indeed, the episodes for cimbalom - and that for violins at the end of the first part - suggest that this ancient civilisation boasted at least one Hungarian restaurant. Both these works have re-emerged on one of several important records from the Budapest Music Center (BMC CD 007), and it is good to have them back. They show the composer-conductor's sure sense of orchestral blendings and placements, his way of making bold gestures and odd ones come out of a seething sensibility, and his keen ear for drama. *Atlantis*, on a text by Sándor Weöres, has a subaqueous, reverberative sound that suits the subject but is also very typical of Eötvös's music, where it often arises from a duality of times: events will be going at dizzying speed on one level, while on another the pace is slow. The album is completed by *Shadows* (1996), half-remembered folk music for flute and clarinet with a much smaller ensemble. Here the conductor is Hans Zender; Eötvös himself, in the other pieces, works with the WDR and BBC symphony orchestras, and with Márta Fabián as cimbalomist in both compositions.

A selection of his vocal works (BMC CD 038) is perhaps even more exhilarating, not least because it enables one to hear how much the composer has changed in almost 40 years - and how much he has stayed the same. In some ways *Two Monologues* (1998), an offshoot from his widely staged *Three Sisters* opera, is far more conservative than the electronic and music-theatre pieces he was producing in the late 1960s and early 70s: it is a linked pair of arias. But Eötvös at once consummately realizes a traditional genre and takes it in new directions - not so much by giving his baritone soloist touches of falsetto as by providing a line that is lyrically expressive yet fresh (and that clearly excites the artistry of Wojtek Drabowicz, the soloist here), and also by creating an orchestral score that is supportive yet also has intentions of its own to explore. At the same time, *Two Monologues* curiously fulfils possibilities inherent in the old experimental pieces. The orchestra's independence develops the stark obliviousness of the solo wood-chopper in *Harakiri* (1973), who goes on with his task while the vocal soloist declaims her lament

and self-examination on the point of suicide. And the braiding of fast and slow times (slow time now fully expressed as non-tonal harmony in *Two Monologues*) turns out to have been present right from *Tale* (1968), in which recordings of a story-teller are overlapped at different speeds.

Most of these vocal works, so varying but so uncannily alike, are offered in recordings made when they were new. That is unavoidably the case with the two tape compositions: *Tale*, created in Cologne, and *Cricketmusic* (1970), from Budapest, where the playful and formally perfect montage of crickets' chirping (the only material) gives the impression that the insects have things they wish to communicate with an almost human vocality.

There is a neat connection with *Insetti galanti*, from the same year, a comedy madrigal in which the text of a Gesualdo madrigal, where the author sees himself as a mosquito and a butterfly at his lady's mercy, is reset in the manner of Ligeti.

With *Harakiri* we have the world première, given by performers who knew they had something extraordinary to deliver. Kaoru Ishii, delivering the text by István Bálint the composer had translated into Japanese, is chilling, and the two wonderful shakuhachi players - Shizuo Aoki and Katsuya Yokoyama - leave it an open question whether they are commiserating with the soloist, weeping the false tears of Job's comforters or standing by as dispassionately as the wood-chopper (Yasunori Yamaguchi). There were many attempts at western *noh* around the time of *Harakiri*, by composers from Britten to Stockhausen, but Eötvös's clarity and his refusal to sentimentalise - coupled with his sagacity in asking questions about this culture and not just clasping it in an embrace - make his piece unusually moving.

His more recent mastery of the orchestra is demonstrated again in *zeroPoints* (2000), which he wrote for the 75th birthday of his colleague Pierre Boulez, providing an appropriate atmosphere of fizzing celebration, but also much more: a chain of beginnings which are all, whether exultant or ominous, brilliantly and characterfully played by the Gothenburg Symphony under the composer in the recording (BMC CD 063), and that convey his usual feeling of music in an echo chamber. The coupling this time is not more Eötvös but Beethoven, which Eötvös conducts as if it were by an admired living colleague. His orchestra is the Ensemble Modern, whose players sound electrified to be playing music so far outside their normal repertory: inner voices come alive, and wind solos are beautifully played. Eötvös uses a modest string section, not so much in order to mimic period practice (which, in any event, was wildly inconsistent in this matter) as to profit from the modern possibility of adding volume by amplifying electronically. This is barely audible, though: the big change is rather in the driving sense of rediscovery.

That same sense is present again in an astonishing Bartók record (BMC CD 058), where Eötvös conducts youth orchestras: the Junge Deutsche Philharmonie in *The Miraculous Mandarin* and the Gustav Mahler Jugendorchester in the *Concerto for Orchestra*. The *Mandarin* performance is quite unusually, perhaps unprecedentedly, expressive: it tears and snarls with tension, gasps and slurps with erotic desire. All one's hopes and fears for this score are confirmed: it really does exude that oily mixture of fascination and distaste, to which Eötvös is close not only as a conductor but also - on the evidence of *zeroPoints*, especially - in his composing. Perhaps inevitably, the account of the *Concerto for Orchestra* is less revelatory, and might even seem like a successful effort on the composer's part at closing the box on his demons.

Two further albums on the same label present alert performances of works by György Kurtág, created in collaboration with the composer. In the case of *Hommage á R. Sch.*, that collaboration goes back a while. Gellért Tihanyi, the clarinetist, was Kurtág's pupil, and gave the first performance in 1990, along with the two other musicians who rejoin him here (on BMC CD 0048): the viola player Zoltán Gaál and Márta Kurtág at the piano. Tihanyi shows the quality of his attention right from his opening phrase, rising to a high note that is subtly moulded in colour. Later he is as remarkable in washed-out, almost toneless moments as in ferocious or desperate seizures of departing initiatives. Gaál's high viola near the start of the long adagio finale - keening, or perhaps watching the disaster from a great height - will be unforgettable. The only mistake, and an understandable one, was to put this piece first on the disc rather than last, where its ultimate gesture, that of a despair-ing but also merciful soft beat on a bass drum, could have been left undisturbed.

As it is, the programme goes immediately into Bartók's *Contrasts*, done with earthy liveliness, and continues with Béla Faragó's *Gregor Samsa's Desires*, a surprisingly genial interpretation of Kafka. Tihanyi is admirable all through, as he is by himself in two solo works profiting from his realisation that the clarinet can be elegant and rustic at the same time, and gaining also from his superb control of each note's shape: Stravinsky's *Three Pieces* (which he plays on clarinets in rising steps, from bass to E flat) and Reich's *New York Counterpoint*.

Ildikó Vékony brings us back to the cimbalom, for a remarkable and musically captivating recital (on BMC CD 046). She shows the power and poetry of the instrument, its range from bell-like authority to touches suggestive of string pizzicatos, and the beauties of its resonances. Sombrely punctuating her programme are solo pieces by Kurtág: his early *Splinters*, in which her timing is exact and her expressivity immense (like the much later *Hommage á R. Sch.* the work is a set of very short movements followed by a big adagio, where what has been avoided has to be confronted), and two more recent samplings, both with haunting melodies that resonate with memories of plainsong and folk music. Pieces by László Sáy, Zsolt Serei and Zoltán Jeney provide attractive space.

Vékony is also partnered by András Keller in a magnificent performance of Kurtág's *Eight Duets* for violin and cimbalom - music that one might suspect these café instruments play when they do not think anyone is listening. In Kurtág relationships are to be cherished precisely because they are so much at risk, and in such early Kurtág as this (1960 - 1), the dangers are often severe. It seems the instruments can come together only to mourn, and even then they may not be able to help mocking each other. Eventually, in the adagio that is the seventh piece, they agree on the identity of their sorrows. But then the finale is a musical game, which ends when the two instruments go in opposite directions, each believing it has made the winning move. This performance leaves one thinking they are both right.

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