

The word becomes music

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Many writers in the twentieth century explored the idea of nothingness, but few mapped out its contours as exactly as Samuel Beckett, whose major works of the 1950s stripped away everything inessential in their pursuit of absolute nullity. Of those great works, it is *Fin de Partie*, first performed in 1957, which seems the most perfect distillation of Beckett's aesthetic, a taut evocation of life hovering at the very edge of non-existence. Although its dialogue is spare and there is little in the way of obvious incident, it manages to encompass its own universe of elusive emotions and unforgettable images.

György Kurtág's *Fin de Partie* – which opened recently at the Opéra national de Paris in the Pierre Audi production which had its world première at La Scala in 2018 – is not, strictly speaking, an adaptation. Although it shares its characters, dialogue and basic scenario with the play – and, indeed, it maintains a scrupulous fidelity to Beckett's text – Kurtág's opera is very much its own creation, neither an expansion, a reworking, nor a straight-ahead setting. Rather Kurtág has used *Fin de Partie* as the foundation for a dazzling summation of his own compositional strategies, and the result is a work that, for all its kinship with Beckett's play of the same name, demands to be taken on its own terms.

Although the opera was composed in the 2010s, Beckett has been a consistent reference point in Kurtág's music over the past three decades. In 1991 he transformed the late poem 'What is the word' into a quarter-hour microdrama which derives its force as much from the syllabic austerity of the text as from the struggle of sound attempting to emerge from the silence. This was followed soon after by *...pas à pas – nulle part...*, a group of Beckett settings for baritone, string trio and percussion. While most of Kurtág's output has tended towards dense, compact, deftly-argued miniatures, Beckett terse drama seems to have encouraged Kurtág to expand into longer forms; within the landscape of his oeuvre, *Fin de Partie* emerges as nothing less than a mountain.

It was inevitable that anything short of a word-for-word setting would change the nature of Beckett's conception. As the subtitle 'Scenes and monologues' suggests, Kurtág offers a selection of moments drawn from the play, some linked to form continuous scenes and

Audi, *Fin de Partie*
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Kurtág: *Fin de*

Partie – Scènes et

monologues (2018). After *Fin de Partie* by
Samuel Beckett. Pierre Audi, director.

Frode Olsen (Hamm), Leigh Melrose

(Clov), Hilary Summers (Nell), and

Leonardo Cortellazzi (Nagg). Orchestra of
the Opéra national de Paris. Markus Stenz,

conductor





Kurtág: Fin de Partie. Pierre Audi, director.
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others separated into discrete episodes by the temporary lowering of the curtain. The scenes included follow the text almost exactly, even maintaining (and occasionally embellishing) the detailed stage directions; it is, however, the choice of scenes included and omitted that shifts the focus and balance of the drama most decisively.

The presence of Clov is notably reduced. If the blind, immobile Hamm is the thematic (and geographical) centre of the play, Clov, still barely able to walk and see, possesses the strongest sense of the impossibility of life beyond the twin circumscriptions of the stage and the text. It is the opening scenes between Hamm and Clov that establish the action as an ongoing ritual of futile repetition, and their absence from Kurtág's libretto not only diminishes the prevailing sense of dread, but also removes the set-up for some of the play's deadpan gags: the toy dog appears without context; the alarm clock wielded by Clov does make an appearance, but its terrible significance goes unexplained; and the revelation that there are no more painkillers loses some of its dark humour without Hamm's incessant demands earlier in the action.

What emerges more clearly in Kurtág's telling is the notion of Hamm as a tyrant determined to extinguish the few faint traces of hope which have somehow survived in his hermetic world. That hope flashes most prominently in the scene between Nell and Nagg, which occupies roughly the centre of the opera (along with Hamm's story, which serves as its darker flip-side). Not only does the scene emerge as the most moving part of the evening, but it also makes the strongest arguments for Kurtág's music as an enrichment of Beckett's text: in Nell's reminiscence of capsizing on Lake Como – of being close to death yet surrounded by beauty – the orchestra drives the scene towards a moment of luminous transcendence that could not have come from words alone.

If Kurtág's dramatic aims are subtly different from Beckett's, his ability to find exactly the right texture, rhythm and mood, not merely for each word, but for each syllable, is a source of constant amazement. No nuance has been overlooked, no pause or stage direction unconsidered, and there are few moments in the score that fail to enhance or illuminate the text. The modestly-sized orchestra, augmented by cymbalom, accordions and numerous percussionist instruments, summon a vast array of sounds and events, finding a voice to match each character and event: Nagg's occasional moments of mirth are transformed into a brief echoing chorus of laughter that dies away as soon as it begins, and during the opening pantomime the music is able to evoke the protracted awkwardness of Clov's movement. Yet Kurtág rarely settles for imitating or underlining the action; rather one is left with the impression that, like Beckett, Kurtág has stripped away everything inessential in his quest to locate and heighten the essence of each moment.



Kurtág: Fin de Partie. Pierre Audi, director.
Markus Stenz, conductor. Paris, April
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Just as Kurtág's selection of episodes forms its own personal argument from Beckett's text,

Pierre Audi's staging offers its own inversion of the original scenario. The action has been transposed from an interior to an exterior: a house is placed in the centre of the stage, which provides the windows through which Clov must occasionally look, and the space into which he can retreat while waiting to be summoned. At various points we see different aspects of the house – an axonometric view in the opening scene, a side elevation for the dialogue of Nell and Nagg – and the structure itself seems to be surrounded by echoes or reverberations of larger similar houses which fade into the darkness of the background. Although Beckett himself may not have approved of the decision to dispense with the bare room, the subtle changes in the set from scene to scene – the rearrangements take place behind a lowered curtain – convey the distinctly Beckettian sense that we are experiencing fragments from a continuous drama on endless repeat.

Apart from these additions and inversions, Mr Audi devoted most of his energy to the task of bringing life to scenes with very little movement, and in this he was assisted by an especially strong cast. Frode Olsen's Hamm, although immobile, dominated the stage as much through his voice as his glowering, dissatisfied presence. His monologues, punctuated by weighty silences, were delivered with an encompassing self-directed grandeur, and he managed to convey the sense of Hamm as both the immovable monolith at the centre of the action and the inescapable black hole into which the remaining hopes, desires and memories of the other characters must eventually be sucked.



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Mr Audi's conception of Clov seemed busier and less orderly than that which might emerge from the text, and while the character stopped short of slapstick, his movements were all the more exaggerated next to the relative stasis around him. In the opening pantomime, Leigh Melrose gave an exacting physical performance, closely tied to the rhythms and silences of the score, but with enough erratic movement to seem unforced; and his agonised stillness in the final scene – suitcase in hand but rooted to the spot – provided an unsettling visual counterpoint to Hamm's last words. Yet it was through voice alone that he turned Clov's final monologue into one of the evening's great moments, and his intensity and simplicity of expression made one wish there had been more of him in the opening scenes.

As Nell, Hilary Summers bantered with Nagg with offhand familiarity, although her delivery turned more spectral and hypnotic when recounting the brush with death on the lake. Ms Summers also sang a setting of the poem 'Roundelay', which Kurtág included as a prelude, highlighting the abstraction of sound that lay beyond the meaning of the words. Leonardo Cortellazzi was equally strong as Nagg, with an energetic voice attuned to the work's dark humour. Despite being confined to a dustbin, his performance was full of subtle physical flourishes that could make him seem the most animated character of the four, and his silent, nearly motionless attention to Hamm's story was a triumph of comedic minimalism.

Conductor Marcus Stenz guided the orchestra through a superb performance, wholly

attentive to both the textural details in the score and the subtle rhythms of the stage action.

Masterpieces are rare, and masterpieces built on the foundation of other masterpieces are even less common. With *Fin de Partie*, however, Kurtág has come very close: although the opera is filled with a palpable reverence for its source, Kurtág does not seem to have been intimidated by the task of transforming it into a distinct work of his own. Instead he has embraced the aesthetic affinities between his own idiom and Beckett's unmistakable style to create a score that will almost certainly continue to fascinate whenever we are fortunate enough to encounter it.