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## **Kurtág 6 Moments Musicaux**

György Kurtág, one of Europe's most important living composers, might be described as a poet among novelists. Unlike the composer who emphasizes the narrative, the evolution of musical drama over time, his preference is for brief movements of music, wherein each harmony is painstakingly chosen, each melodic gesture distilled, each syllable full of potential, manifold significance. In this respect, he is a natural heir of Anton Webern, whose influence he acknowledges both explicitly and allusively.

*Six Moments Musicaux*, composed in 2005, is among the most recent of Kurtág's string quartet works. The title brings to mind the many eponymous piano works by Schubert, who used the label to denote a group of relatively short character pieces for piano, that could be performed together and set each other into relief, but were not part of one structure as are the movements of a sonata, for example. Brief descriptions of Kurtág's six *Moments* follow:

1. *Invocatio*. The Latin term brings to mind the plea from a poet to his muse at the start of an epic work. In this case the invocation is harsh and embattled, suggesting a difficult, fraught creative process. The middle contrasting passage of the movement is hushed, a murmured "hocket" melody whose notes are passed from instrument to instrument, culminating in a brief, luminous chorale.

2. *Footfalls*. Samuel Beckett, a lifelong influence on Kurtág, wrote a play by the same name, which features a pacing female character whose footsteps were meant to be metronomic, audible, and central to the meaning of the play. Independently of this, Kurtág cites a poem by the celebrated Hungarian poet Endre Ady, with its own very different message:

*No One Comes*

Kipp-kopp, as if a woman were coming  
On a dark stairway, trembling, running  
My heart stops, I await something wonderful  
In the autumn dusk, confident.

Kipp-kopp, my heart starts up once again  
I hear it once again, to my deep and great pleasure  
In a soft tempo, in a secret rhythm  
As if someone were coming, were coming

Kipp-kopp, now a funeral twilight  
A misty, hollow melody sounds  
The autumn evening. Today no one come to me  
Today no one will come to me, no one.

3. *Capriccio*. Lively, hiccuping, the comic relief of the work, the composer describes this movement as “full of cunning pitfalls”, as much for the performers as for the listener. The music features stutterings, sudden pauses, rude outbursts, and a few moments where the viola seems to be slipping on a banana peel.

4. *In memoriam Sebök György*. A eulogy to his fellow Hungarian, the inspiring pianist and teacher György Sebök. A dirgelike main idea, heavy and burdened, is answered by a rising, luminous major triad that appears first in the cello, like a moment of grace. These ideas alternate throughout the movement, grief pitted against the almost-hopeful.

5. [*étude pour les harmoniques*]. Marked “light, tender, volatile”, this is bird-music for string quartet, written almost entirely in harmonics (a technique of stopping the strings to produce a flute-like sound). Evanescent, rhythmically playful, the music is halted twice for a sinister moment, where the cello intones a line from *Dies irae* marked “Mors, mors stupebit” (“Death itself will be struck dumb”), a reference to Judgment Day.

6. *Les adieux [in Janáček's Manier]*. The reference to Janáček recalls that composer’s fascination with the rhythms of human speech, and his dedication to recapturing those rhythms in his music; here too the music has a speech-like cadence, especially in the opening moments. In certain passages the violins are directed to use metal mutes, to create an especially distant and ethereal effect. At the end, appropriate for a farewell movement, the music wanders further and further away, ultimately evaporating into silence.

Note by Misha Amory