WIGMORE HALL

Friday 18 September 2026
10.00pm

Kafka Fragments

Rebecca Hardwick soprano
Tamsin Waley-Cohen violin

György Kurtág (b.1926)

Kafka-Fragmente Op. 24 (1985-7)

I. Teil
1. Die Guten gehn im gleichen Schritt... • 2. Wie ein Weg im Herbst • 3. Verstecke • 4. Ruhelos • 5. Berceuse I • 6. Nimmermehr (Excommunication) • 7. »Wenn er mich immer frägt« • 8. Es zupfte mich jemand am Kleid • 9. Die Weissnäherinnen • 10. Szene am Bahnhof • 11. Sonntag, den 19. Juli 1910 (Berceuse II) (Hommage à Jeney) • 12. Meine Ohrmuschel... • 13. Einmal brach ich mir das Bein (Chassidischer Tanz) • 14. Umpanzert • 15. Zwei Spazierstücke (Authentisch-Plagal) • 16. Keine Rückkehr • 17. Stolze (1910/15 November, zehn Uhr) • 18. Träumend hing die Blume (Hommage à Schumann) • 19. Nichts dergleichen

II. Teil
Der wahre Weg (Hommage-message à Pierre Boulez)

III. Teil
1. Haben? Sein? • 2. Der Coitus als Bestrafung (Canticulum Mariae Magdalanae) • 3. Meine Gefägnisszelle • 4. Schmutzig bin ich, Milená... • 5. Elendes Leben (Double) • 6. Der begrenzte Kreis • 7. Ziel, Weg, Zögern • 8. So fest • 9. Penetrant jüdisch • 10. Verstecke (Double) • 11. Staunend sahen wir das Grosse Pferd • 12. Szene in der Elektrischen, 1910 (»Ich bat im Traum die Tänzerin Eduardowa, sie möchte doch den Csárdás noch eimal tanzen.«)

IV. Teil
1. Zu spät (22. Oktober 1913) • 2. Eine lange Geschichte • 3. In memoriam Robert Klein • 4. Aus einem alten Notizbuch • 5. Leoparden • 6. In memoriam Johannis Pilinszky • 7. Wiederum, wiederum • 8. Es blendete uns die Mondnacht

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Interviewer Bálint András Varga asked a number of composers, including Kurtág, to draw a graphic image to represent their music. Kurtág responded with three drawings, the first two of which were very similar – a small, quick, angular mark on the page; at first glance a squiggle but on closer inspection a web of fine monochromatic lines creating an intriguing form. (He specified, 'They don't really *reflect* my music; I'd prefer to say I would be happy if my music were like that'). These tiny, condensed drawings offer a glimpse into Kurtág's world of hidden messages and enigmatic symbols, with intricate details that beckon closer scrutiny. The delicate nature of the lines and patterns within each fragment suggests a sense of hidden complexity waiting to be unravelled; one cannot help but draw parallels between these drawings and the overarching theme of *Kafka Fragments*; to seek the truth within the abstract. The compressed and dense composition of these drawings could also be as crude as an insect squashed on the page, which invites comparisons with the protagonist in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, who wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a monstrous bug.

A combination echoing his roots in Hungarian folk music magnified through a contemporary classical lens, *Kafka Fragments* is a modernist musical work that uniquely sets abstract text fragments by Kafka within musical vignettes designed for soprano and violin. The work was finished in 1987 and consists of 40 extracts of Kafka's text extracted from letters, diaries, aphorisms, notebooks and unpublished writings, set concisely to snippets of music, some only lasting mere seconds. Parts I and III mirror each other in content and substance, while Part II is a longer passage of sustained and consistent sound, a winding and yearning homage to Pierre Boulez. Part IV compounds and cracks to reveal the final movement, aesthetically independent from the previous epigrammatic writing, conjuring an extended other-worldly spell.

Kurtág has spoken of suppressing a tendency toward theatrical gesture in his practice, although his compositions are frequently described as having dramatic qualities and referred to as 'camouflaged operas'. Aged 93, he finally composed his first opera *Fin de partie*, based on Beckett's play *Endgame*, composed for La Scala, Milan in 2018. This aversion for theatre is at odds with how *Kafka Fragments* has been received creatively. Performances of the piece have previously been included under the umbrella of opera and staged song cycle, with stage directors adding layers of interpretative meaning over the abstract modernist aesthetic language of the piece, notably Peter Sellars's Royal Opera House production at the Linbury Studio Theatre (2005).

The writing is extreme for both singer and violinist, pushing the boundaries of what is achievable and comfortable to produce. The journey through *Kafka Fragments* is one of constant negotiation between restriction and empowerment; performers must find a balance between the work as a site of boundary-pushing exploration on the one hand and rigid and defined within strict Western practice on the other. This duality is at the heart of the abstract modernist approach, where the boundaries of traditional art forms are pushed to their limits, resulting in becoming closer to Kafka's goal of existential truth.

The original aim of my doctoral thesis was to build a language of movement for *Kafka Fragments* to illuminate the abstract modernist character of the work without the need to impose an additional narrative in operatic form, or to present simply as a song recital. Experimenting with different schools, I was drawn to Meyerhold's biomechanics as a focus on the precise and dynamic use of the actor's body as a tool for expression. Formulated during the 1920s in Soviet Russia, it represented one of the most significant departures from psychological realism in 20th-century theatre. Biomechanics was conceived as a counterpoint to Stanislavski's emphasis on internal emotional states, foregrounding the actor's physical expressivity as the primary vehicle for meaning-making on stage. Meyerhold's approach was deeply informed by the socio-political and aesthetic currents of his time, including constructivism, Taylorist efficiency theories, and the avant-garde's fascination with mechanisation and rhythm. The exacting nature of Meyerhold's etudes struck me as a method of movement comparable to Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*. This method was successful for its first performance in Milton Court. Tonight's recital offers another version, an example onstage of different degrees of how gesture and movement can be used when it serves the music specifically, and when it doesn't. The female performing persona becomes a vehicle for self-expression and empowerment, using the man-made language of music and text to convey their own unique perspective. Theatricality is balanced with a commitment to musical connection and collaboration within this intimate space.

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György Kurtág (b.1926)

Kafka-Fragmente Op. 24 (1985-7)

Franz Kafka

Kafka Fragments

I. Teil

1. Die Guten gehn im gleichen Schritt...

Die Guten gehn im gleichen Schritt. Ohne von ihnen zu

Wissen, tanzen die anderen um sie die Tänze der Zeit.

The righteous march in step

The righteous march in step. The others, unaware of them,
dance around them the dances of time.

2. Wie ein Weg im Herbst

Wie ein Weg im Herbst: Kaum ist er rein gekehrt,

Bedeckt er sich wieder mit den trockenen Blättern.

Like a path in autumn

Like a path in autumn: no sooner has it been swept clean
than it is covered once more with dry leaves.

3. Verstecke

Verstecke sind unzählige, Rettung nur eine, aber

Möglichkeiten der Rettung wieder so viele wie

Verstecke.

Hiding-places

There are countless hiding-places, only one salvation –
but there are as many paths to salvation as there are
hiding-places.

4. Ruhelos

Ruhelos, ruhelos.

Restless

Restless, restless.

5. Berceuse I

Schlage deinen Manel, hoher Traum, um das Kind.

Lullaby I

Wrap your cloak, lofty dream, around the child.

6. Nimmermehr (Excommunication)

Nimmermehr, nimmermehr kehrst du wieder die Städte,
Nimmermehr tönt die grosse Glocke über dir.

Nevermore (Excommunication)

Nevermore, nevermore shall you return to towns,
nevermore shall the great bell toll above you.

7. »Wenn er mich immer frägt«

»Wenn er mich immer frägt.« Das ä, losgelöst vom Satz,

Flog dahin wie ein Ball auf der Wiese.

Whenever he asks me a question

Whenever he asks me a question [frägt], the ä, detached from the sentence,
flew off like a ball across a meadow.

8. Es zupfte mich jemand am Kleid

Es zupfte mich jemand am Kleid, aber ich schüttelte Ihn ab.

Someone tugged my coat sleeve

Someone tugged my coat sleeve but I shrugged him off.

9. Die Weissnäherinnen

Die Weissnäherinnen in den Regengüssen.

The seamstress

The seamstress caught in the cloudbursts.

10. Szene am Bahnhof

Die Zuscheuer erstarren, wenn der Zug vorbeifahrt.

Scene at the station

The onlookers freeze when the train rushes past.

11. Sonntag, den 19. Juli 1910 (Berceuse II) (Hommage à Jeney)

Geschlafen, aufgewacht, geschlafen, aufgewacht, elendes Leben.

Sunday, 19 July 1910 (Lullaby II)

Slept, woke, slept, woke, wretched life.

12. Meine Ohrmuschel...

Meine Ohrmuschel fühlte sich frisch, rauh, saltig an wie ein Blatt.

My ear...

When I touched my ear, it felt fresh, rough, cool, juicy like a leaf.

13. Einmal brach ich mir das Bein (Chassidischer Tanz)

Einmal brach ich mir das Bei, es war das schönste Erlebnis meines Lebens.

I broke my leg once

I broke my leg once, it was the most wonderful experience of my life.

14. Umpanzert

Einen Augenblick lang fühlte ich mich umpanzert.

Enarmoured

For a moment I felt myself enarmoured.

Please turn the page as quietly as possible.

15. Zwei Spazierstücke (Authentisch-Plagal)

Auf Balzacs Spazierstockgriff: Ich breche all Hindernisse. Auf meinem: Mich brechen alle Hindernisse. Gemeinsam ist das »alle.«

Two walking-sticks

Leaning on Balzac's walking stick: I surmount all obstacles. Leaning on mine: all obstacles defeat me. 'All' is what they have in common.

16. Keine Rückkehr

Von einem gewissen Punkt an gibt es keine Rückkehr
Mehr. Dieser Punkt ist zu erreichen.

No going back

From a certain point, there is no going back.
That is the point to reach.

17. Stolze (1910/15 November, zehn Uhr)

Ich werde mich nicht müde werden lassen. Ich werde
In meine Novelle hineinspringen und wenn es mir das
Gesicht zerscheiden sollte.

Pride (15 November 1910, 10am)

I shall not allow myself to be wearied. I shall
dive into my novella, even if it

lacerates my face.

18. Träumend hing die Blume (Hommage à Schumann)

Träumend hing die Blume am hohen Stengel.

Abenddämmerung umzog sie.

The flower drooped dreamily

The flower drooped dreamily on its tall stem.
Dusk enveloped it.

19. Nichts dergleichen

Nichts dergleichen, nichts dergleichen.

Nothing of the kind

Nothing of the kind, nothing of the kind.

II. Teil

Der wahre Weg (Hommage-message à Pierre Boulez)

Der Wahre Weg geht über ein Seil, das nicht in der Höhe gespannt ist, sondern knapp über den Boden. Es scheint mehr bestimmt, stolpern zu machen, als begangen
Zu werden.

The true path

The true path lies over a rope – suspended not high up but just above the ground. Its purpose appears to be more to make one stumble than for it to be
walked on.

III. Teil

1. Haben? Sein?

Es gibt kein Habe, nur ein Sein, nur ein nach letztem

Atem, nach Ersticken verlangendes Sein.

To have? To be?

There is no 'to have', only a 'to be', a 'to be' craving
the final breath, craving suffocation.

2. Der Coitus als Bestrafung (Canticulum Mariae Magdalanae)

Der Coitus als Bestrafung des Glückes des Beisammenseins.

Coitus as punishment

Coitus as the punishment for being happy together.

3. Meine Gefägnisszelle

Meine Gefägnisszelle, meine Festung.

My fortress

My prison-cell – my fortress.

4. Schmutzig bin ich, Milená...

Schmutzig bin ich, Milená, endlos schmutzig, darum mache ich ein solches Gechrei mit der Reinheit. Niemand singt so rein als die, welche in der tiefsten Hölle sind; was wir für den Gesang der Engle halten, ist ihr Gesang.

I am dirty, Milena...

I am dirty, Milena, endlessly dirty, that's why I set such store by cleanliness. No-one sings as purely as those in deepest Hell; what they take to be the singing of angels, is their own song.

5. Elendes Leben (Double)

Geschlafen, aufgewacht, geschlafen, aufgewacht,
Elendes Leben.

Wretched life

Slept, woke, slept, woke,

wretched life.

6. Der begrenzte Kreis

Der begrenzte Kreis ist rein.

The closed circle

The closed circle is pure.

7. Ziel, Weg, Zögern

Es gibt ein Ziel, aber keinen Weg; was wir Weg nennen, ist Zögern.

Destination, path, procrastination

There is a destination but no path to it; what we call a path is procrastination.

8. So fest

So fest wie die Hand den Stein hält. Sie hält ihn aber fest,
Nur um ihn desto weiter zu verwerfen. Aber auch in jene
Weite führt der Weg.

As tightly

As tightly as the hand grips the stone. It grips it so tightly
in order to hurl it as far as possible. But the path will reach
even as far as that.

9. Penetrant jüdisch

Im Kampft zwischen dir und der Welt sekundiere der Welt.

Aggressively Jewish

In the struggle between yourself and the world, side with the world.

10. Verstecke (Double)

Verstecke sind unzählige, Rettung nur eine, aber Möglichkeiten der Rettung wieder so viele wie Verstecke.

Hiding-places

There are countless hiding-places, only one salvation – but there are as many paths to salvation as there are hiding-places.

11. Staunend sahen wir das Grosse Pferd

Staunend sahen wir das grosse Pferd. Es durchbrach
Das Dach unserer Stube. Der bewölkte Himmel zog
Sich schwach entlang des gewaltigen Umrisses, und
Rauschend flog die Mähne im Wind.

Astonished, we saw the great horse

Astonished, we saw the great horse. It broke

through the ceiling of our room. The overcast sky
scudded weakly along the mighty silhouette,
its mane streaming in the wind.

12. Szene in der Elektrischen, 1910 (»Ich bat im Traum die Tänzerin Eduardowa, sie möchte doch den Csárdás noch eimal tanzen.«)

Die Tänzerin Eduardowa, eine Liebhaberin der Musik, fährt wie überall so auch in der Elektrischen in Begleitung zweier Violinisten, die sie Häufig spielen lät. Denn es besteht kein Verbot, warum in der Elektrischen nicht gespielt werden dürfte, wenn das Spiel gut, den Mitfahrenden angenehm ist und nichts kostet, das heisst, wenn nachher nicht eingesammelt wird. Es ist allerdings im Anfang ein wenig überraschend, und ein Weilchen lang findet jeder, es sei unpassend. Aber bei voller Fahrt,

Starkem Luftzug und stiller Gasse klingt es hübsch.

Scene on a tram ('In a dream I asked the dancer Eduardowa if she would care to dance the czárdás again.')

The dancer Eduardowa, a lover of music, travels wherever she goes, even on a train, in the company of two violinists whom she frequently asks to play. For playing music on a tram is not forbidden, as long as the playing is good, pleasing to the passengers and free of charge – and as long as there be no collection afterwards. Initially, it's a little surprising, and everyone for a while considers it inappropriate. But at full speed,
with a strong through-breeze and in a quiet street, it sounds good.

IV. Teil

1. Zu spät (22. Oktober 1913)

Zu spät. Die Süssigkeit der Trauer und der Liebe. Von ihr angelächelt werden im Boot. Das war das Allerschönste. Immer nur das Verlangen, zu sterben und das Sich-noch-Halten, das allein ist Liebe.

Too late

The sweetness of sorrow and love. To be smiled at by her in a boat. That was the height of bliss. Always just the longing to die, and the surviving – that alone is love.

2. Eine lange Geschichte

Ich sehe einem Mädchen in die Augen, und es war eine
Sehf lange Liebesgeschichte mit Donner und Küssen und
Blitz. Ich lebe rasch.

A long story

I look a girl in the eye, and it was a
very long love story with thunder and kisses and

lightning. I live in the fast lane.

3. In memoriam Robert Klein

Noch spielen die Jagdhunde im Hof, aber das Wild entgeht ihnen nicht, so dehr es jetzt schon durch die Wälder jagt.

In memoriam Robert Klein

Though the hounds are still in the courtyard, the prey will not escape, no matter how fast they bolt through the woods.

4. Aus einem alten Notizbuch

Jetzt am Abend, nachdem ich von sechs Uhr früh an geiernt habe, bemerkte ich, wie meine linke Hand die rechte schon ein Weilchen lang aus Mitleid bei den
Fingern umfasst hielt.

From an old notebook

Now in the evening, having studied since six in the morning, I notice how my left hand has for some time been gripping the fingers of my right,
out of pity.

Please turn the page as quietly as possible.

5. Leoparden

Leoparden brechen in den Tempel ein und saufen die Opferkürge leer; das wiederholt sich immer wieder; schliesslich kann man es vorausberechnen, und es wird

Ein Teil der Zeremonie.

Leopards

Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial jug dry; it happens again and again – till finally you know in advance when they will appear; and they

become part of the ceremony.

6. In memoriam Johannis Pilinszky

Ich kann…nicht eigentlich erzählen, ja fast nicht einmal

Reden; wenn ich erzähle, habe ich meistens ein Geföh, wie es kleine Kinder haben könnten, die die ersten Gehversuche machen.

In memoriam Joannis Pilinszky

I actually do not know how … to tell a story – in fact, I'm almost even unable to

speak; when I tell a story, I mostly feel the way small children might feel when they try to walk for the first time.

7. Wiederum, wiederum

Wiederum, wiederum, weit verbannt, weit verbannt.

Berge, Wüste, weites Land gilt es zu durchwandern.

Again, again

Again, again, banished far away, banished far away.

I have to traverse mountains, desert, a vast country.

8. Es blendete uns die Mondnacht

Es blendete uns die Mondnacht. Vögel schrien von Baum zu Baum. In den Feldern sauste es. Wie krochen durch den Staub ein Schlangenpaar.

The moonlit night dazzled us…

The moonlit night dazzled us. Birds shrieked from tree to tree. Wind soughed in fields. We crawled through the dust, a pair of snakes.

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