

SIGNS, GAMES
& MESSAGES



WORKS FOR SOLO VIOLIN
BY BARTÓK & KURTÁG

SIMON SMITH
VIOLIN

Signs, Games & Messages

Works for Solo Violin by Bartók & Kurtág

Simon Smith *violin*

About Simon Smith:

*'[...] a virtuoso who is at once darkly cool and immensely persuasive [...]
selfless playing, devoted to making the music exist as fully as possible'*

The Times

'[...] startling talent'

The Guardian

György Kurtág (b. 1926)

Signs, Games & Messages

for solo violin

1. Perpetuum mobile (A)	[0:52]
2. Doloroso	[1:41]
3. Hommage à J.S.B.	[1:20]
4. Hommage à John Cage	[1:29]
5. In Nomine – all'ongherese	[4:52]
6. The Carezza Jig	[0:44]
7. Perpetuum mobile (B)	[1:07]
8. Calmo, sognando	[1:45]
9. Kromatikus feleselős	[1:05]
10. In memoriam Blum Tamás	[2:05]
11. Népdalféle	[0:57]
12. Perpetuum mobile (C)	[1:02]
13. ... féerie d'automne ...	[1:34]
14. Mensáros László emlékére	[0:40]
15. Panaszos nóta	[1:09]
16. Anziks Kellerannának	[0:45]
17. ... für den, der heimlich lauschet ...	[1:31]
18. Antifóna Hirominak	[3:20]

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Sonata for Solo Violin, Sz 117

19. Tempo di ciaccona	[11:12]
20. Fuga	[5:00]
21. Melodia	[6:48]
22. Presto	[5:36]

Total playing time [56:47]



Signs, Games and Messages: Works for Solo Violin by Bartók and Kurtág

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)
Sonata for Solo Violin, Sz 117

Tempo di ciaccona
Fuga: Risoluto, non troppo vivo
Melodia: Adagio
Presto

Béla Bartók arrived in the United States on 11 April 1940 and two days later gave a recital with Joseph Szigeti (1892-1973) at the Library of Congress, performing music by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), Claude Debussy (1862-1918) and Bartók himself. Several other concerts followed, and when he returned to war-torn Europe in May, he wrote to his pupil Dorothy Parrish that there were plans for him to come back to America, 'perhaps for several years.' In November 1940, he was back in New York with his wife Ditta, and he was to remain in the USA until his death in 1945. These were difficult years, dogged by illness, shortage of money and hostility from critics. A more positive side of Bartók's American years can be found in the performances of his music, many given by friends and compatriots such as Fritz Reiner (1888-1963), Antal Dorati (1906-88) and (1899-1985), and important

commissions including Serge Koussevitzky's (1874-1951) request for the Concerto for Orchestra. It was Dorati – a former Bartók pupil – who encouraged his friend Yehudi Menuhin (1916-99) to make contact with the composer.

The first meeting between Bartók and Menuhin took place in November 1943 at the Park Avenue apartment of Mrs Lionello Perera in New York. It began rather stiffly: when Menuhin and Adolph Baller (1909-94) arrived to play the First Violin Sonata, Sz 75, to the composer (at Menuhin's request), the atmosphere was austere. Menuhin recalled that 'Bartók was already there, seated in an armchair placed uncompromisingly straight on to the piano, with score laid open before him and pencil in his hand: an attitude I found both chilling and, in my experience, characteristically Hungarian.' Hearing Menuhin and Baller play the sonata, Bartók quickly thawed, delighted by the performance. As Menuhin put it: 'Without idle words, we made each other's acquaintance.' Menuhin knew that Bartók was ill, that he was in desperate need of money, and that he was 'the greatest of living composers'. Seizing the moment, that same afternoon of their first meeting, he asked Bartók if he would accept a commission for an unaccompanied violin sonata. The composer agreed, and the work was written in Asheville, North Carolina,

near the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, where Bartók stayed at the Albermarle Inn – an elegant small hotel – from December 1943 until April 1944. The main purpose of the visit was to improve Bartók's health, and he quickly began to feel stronger, and to recover his spirits. Hans Heinsheimer (1900-93), who worked for Boosey & Hawkes in New York, wrote that Bartók 'found a quiet room in the outskirts, where neither traffic lights nor radios interfered with the absolute concentration that he craved. At last he smelled fresh air again, saw the sky, felt the soil.'

This idyllic working holiday turned out to be a productive as well as restorative. Bartók devoted most of his time to three projects. The first was the classification and translation of a vast collection of folk songs from the Romanian region of Wallachia; the second was making a solo piano transcription of the Concerto for Orchestra, Sz 116; and the third was writing the new Sonata for Menuhin. He composed this in just over a month, starting in February and finishing in mid-March. The last page of the score is dated 14 March 1944, and on 18 March he wrote to Heinsheimer to announce that the work was completed. Once the Sonata was finished, he wrote to Menuhin with some technical questions:

I am rather worried about the 'playability' of some of the double stops etc. [...] I should like to have your advice. I sent you two copies. Would you be so kind as to introduce in one of them the necessary changes in bowing, and perhaps the absolutely necessary fingering and other suggestions, and return it to me? And also indicate the impracticable difficulties? I would try to change them.

Menuhin later admitted that when he first saw the manuscript, in March 1944, 'I admit I was shaken. It seemed to me almost unplayable.' But despite its considerable difficulty, closer familiarity with the work quickly led him to change this view: 'That first hasty impression was ill-judged: the Solo Sonata is eminently playable, beautifully composed for the violin, one of the most dramatic and fulfilling works that I know of.' Menuhin responded to Bartók's requests for suggestions about revisions, and the two met again in November 1944, shortly before the premiere, to discuss small last-minute changes – though Bartók was by now certain what he wanted. As Menuhin recalled, 'when I asked him if he would alter one chord, he said, fixing me with that mesmeric gaze for a few moments, "No."'

The Sonata is in four movements. The first, marked 'Tempo di ciaccona', is a magnificent homage to the Chaconne that ends J.S. Bach's D minor Partita: a twentieth-century reinvention

of Bach's solo violin writing (though Bartók's structure is closer to Sonata Form), making huge demands on the player, and producing music which has unmistakably Hungarian inflections woven into material notable for its sense of breadth, its expressive range, and its noble modernity. The second movement is an astonishing exercise in compositional virtuosity: a fiery even violent 'Fuga'. It begins – like the second movement of the Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, Sz 106 – with an agitated rising minor third, which launches a thrilling exploration of what kind of twentieth-century counterpoint is possible on a violin. The fugue ends, as it began, with the rising minor third. The slow movement, entitled simply 'Melodia' is a complete contrast, with a mood of tranquility that becomes, in places, an unearthly serenity. The final 'Presto' has a dance-like energy and momentum that drives the work to an exciting conclusion. A few moments of repose interrupt the headlong vitality of this movement, which ends with a rushing scale and a triumphant chord of G major.

Menuhin gave the first performance at Carnegie Hall, New York, on 26 November 1944, in the presence of the composer. In his autobiography, Menuhin wrote: 'That I should have evoked this magnificent music is a source of infinite satisfaction



Béla Bartók

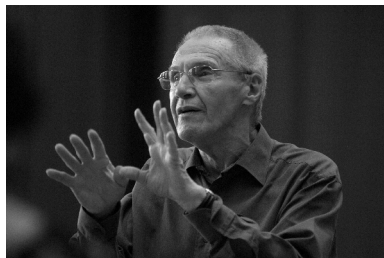
to me; that I should have played it to Bartók before he died remains one of the great milestones of my life.'

György Kurtág (b. 1926)
Signs, Games and Messages
for solo violin

György Kurtág arrived at the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest in 1946, the year after Bartók's death. At the entrance exams, he first met György Ligeti (1923-2006), who was to become a lifelong friend. Kurtág graduated

first as a pianist (in 1951) and completed his composition studies in 1955. After the Hungarian uprising in 1956, Kurtág fled to Paris where he attended classes given by Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) and Olivier Messiaen (1908-92), and made several discoveries that were to have a lasting impact, including the music of Anton Webern (1883-1945) and the plays of Samuel Beckett (1906-89). Kurtág's two years in Paris were marked by a growing sense of despair and severe depression, and he sought help from the Hungarian-born psychoanalyst Marianne Stein. According to Kurtág, their encounter helped him to 'concentrate on essential things.' Stein's unusual art therapy included the construction of very small matchstick sculptures. For Kurtág this was a turning point, enabling him to develop what his friend Ligeti characterised as 'fantastic inner concentration on tiny subtle gestures'. On return to Budapest in 1959, Kurtág produced his Opus 1, a String Quartet that he dedicated to Marianne Stein.

This focus on tiny details within small forms finds some of its most potent expression in the series of pieces called *Játékok* ('Games'), an ever-growing collection of short works for a variety of instruments including piano four-hands and two pianos, viola, cello, double bass, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, string duos and trios, and even



György Kurtág

duets for his beloved cimbalom. Starting in the early 1970s with piano pieces, Kurtág's later 'Games' were called *Signs, Games and Messages*. The pieces for solo violin were composed from the late 1980s onwards. Though short in duration, it is misleading to call them 'miniatures', since Kurtág's musical aphorisms are often searching and experimental. In an interview with Bálint András Varga, Kurtág said: 'Anything can be an inspiring experience if you are in the proper receptive state [...] if you are open.' Kurtág is true to his word: in *Signs, Games and Messages* the music often takes the simplest of starting points to produce music of startling intensity.

The first few pieces on this disc exemplify this, as well as the range and variety of Kurtág's writing. 'Perpetuum mobile'

(composed in 1987 and revised in 1991) explores what is possible taking the sound of the violin's open strings as a starting point. 'Doloroso' (written in 1992) grows from a hushed motif of great simplicity, a six-note figure of rocking semitones (C and B) marked to be played *senza colore*. Another feature of *Signs, Games and Messages* is Kurtág's reference back to earlier music, and this is exemplified by 'Homage à J.S.B.' which is an elegant and utterly fresh reflection on J.S. Bach's unaccompanied violin writing. 'Homage à John Cage – Faltering Words' is a poignant, rather desolate piece in which the violin seems to be trying to reach upwards from one note to the next, but constantly falls back. 'In Nomine – all'ongherese' was composed in 2001, inspired by the consort music of English composers such as Taverner and Dowland. While the source may be remote, the spirit of the title is more clearly reflected in gestures and fragments that have the unmistakable stamp of the Hungarian folk music that is so central to Kurtág's musical make-up, as it had been for Bartók. The story behind 'The Carezza Jig' is a delightful one. Kurtág wrote it for an eight year-old girl called Carezza with whose family Kurtág stayed as a guest in Cornwall (it is dated 'Penberth ... Prussia Cove, 1989', with final revisions made in 1997). He wrote that

Carenza 'could already play some *Jákétok* on the piano and was learning the violin too'. Marked 'Brisk and Wild', it is one of the most brilliant of the musical postcards that make up this collection. Many of those that follow have very personal connections, including pieces that celebrate the birthdays of friends, and others that are memorials. The last piece is also one of the most substantial: 'Antifóna Hirominak' was written for the violinist Hiromi Kikuchi, one of Kurtág's most devoted champions.

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Simon Smith

Simon Smith is a violinist of wide ranging interests. He has been active as a performer and teacher worldwide for 30 years. In the UK he has performed as a soloist with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, the Philharmonia, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, and the Orchestra of St John's Smith Square; recitals have included the Wigmore Hall and the Purcell Room. Abroad he has performed extensively across Russia with recitals and concerto performances from Moscow to Vladivostock, and played concertos in Hong Kong and Beijing. His repertoire ranges across the entire spectrum from Baroque to contemporary and he is currently commissioning a number of new works.

A committed chamber musician, Simon was a member of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields Octet, performing in concert halls and broadcasts worldwide. Other projects include an album of duos and trios by Zoltán Kodály and Ernő Dohnányi.

Simon has been a professor at the Birmingham Conservatoire for twelve years. He has given masterclasses throughout the UK and in Russia, China, Kazakhstan and

Singapore. Future plans include further visits to Holland, Belgium and Ireland and return trips to Russia and Hong Kong.

Simon was leader of Chamber Orchestra Anglia from its inception and is now its Artistic Director.

Simon studied with David Martin and Frederick Grinke, and then with Yfrah Neaman at the Guildhall School of Music, where he was awarded the Gold Medal. He received a DAAD scholarship to continue his studies in Germany with Wanda Wilkomirska.

He plays on a Rogeri violin, made in 1708.

www.simonsmithviolin.com

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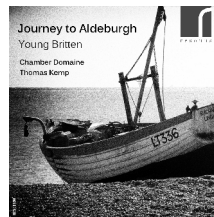
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