



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

A Masterpiece of Minimalism and Existential Despair

Vienna State Opera, 22.10.2024 [ENA]

In a breathtaking and haunting realization of Samuel Beckett's *Fin de partie* (Endgame), György Kurtág's operatic adaptation of the play stands as a stunning testament to the power of minimalism in contemporary music theater. Under the impeccable musical direction of Simone Young and with a stellar cast featuring Charles Workman (Nagg), Hilary Summers (Nell), Philippe Sly (Clov), and Georg Nigl (Hamm).

This one-act opera leaves a deep emotional impact, capturing the bleak, desolate world of Beckett's original text while allowing Kurtág's sparse yet intensely expressive music to heighten the existential tension. Set in a post-apocalyptic landscape that Beckett famously described as "life in death," the four characters of *Fin de partie* are trapped in a cycle of despair and repetition, and Kurtág's score masterfully accentuates this atmosphere of stasis and desolation. The landscape is barely habitable, and the four characters—Hamm, confined to a wheelchair; his servant Clov, who cannot sit; and Hamm's legless parents Nagg and Nell, who live in dustbins—exist in a claustrophobic world of decay.

The opera's minimalist setting and music convey this suffocating sense of time running out, yet without resolution or relief. Simone Young's precise and focused musical leadership deserves the highest praise. Kurtág's music is intricate, full of quiet tension and subtle dissonance, requiring a conductor who can delicately balance its emotional nuances with its structural precision. Young's command of the orchestra is flawless, ensuring that the music never overwhelms the vocal lines but instead complements the sparse, spoken-like singing style Kurtág employs. The resulting soundscape is stark, yet strangely beautiful—like a desert that reveals its hidden beauty in the smallest of details.

Under Young's direction, the score feels like a living organism, responding to the smallest shifts in the characters' emotional states. The orchestra provides not just a backdrop but a visceral presence, its austere tones often mirroring the grim existence of the characters. Her understanding of Kurtág's intentions—his use of silence, the sparse instrumentation, and the strategic use of dissonance—enhances the impact of Beckett's absurdist, existential themes. The pacing, too, is expertly handled, allowing the music's slow, almost agonizing unfolding to reflect the stagnation and repetitiveness of the characters' lives.

Georg Nigl's portrayal of Hamm is nothing short of monumental. As the blind, paralyzed tyrant who controls his small, pitiful world from a wheelchair, Nigl imbues the character with a potent mix of cruelty, vulnerability, and tragic grandeur. His voice, rich with authority yet tempered by moments of fragility,

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perfectly captures the duality of Hamm—both the ruler of this bleak domain and a helpless figure in his own right. Nigl’s vocal control is exceptional, effortlessly navigating Kurtág’s complex score while maintaining the emotional weight of every word he sings.

Nigl’s Hamm is a figure tormented by the burden of existence, trapped in a perpetual cycle of memory and decay. His interactions with Clov, whom he orders about with increasing desperation, reveal a deep, almost primal need for control, yet this control is always slipping away. Nigl brings out the layers of Hamm’s character with remarkable clarity—his cruelty towards Clov, his desperate need for companionship, and his ultimate realization that even this pitiful life is nearing its inevitable end. It is a performance that lingers in the mind long after the final note has faded.

Philippe Sly’s Clov is the perfect counterbalance to Nigl’s Hamm, embodying the weariness and frustration of a man trapped in servitude yet unable to break free. Sly’s physical performance—his stiff, mechanical movements, his inability to sit—captures the absurdity of Clov’s existence, while his vocal delivery conveys the character’s emotional exhaustion. Sly’s baritone is rich and resonant, and he navigates Kurtág’s demanding score with precision, bringing out the dark humor and pathos in Clov’s situation.

Clov is the only character who can move freely, yet he is bound to Hamm by an invisible chain of duty and habit. Sly’s portrayal emphasizes this paradox—his desire to leave, to escape this oppressive environment, is palpable, yet he remains. The tension between his yearning for freedom and his inability to act on it is one of the opera’s most compelling aspects, and Sly brings a deep sense of resignation to the role. His final scene, in which he prepares to leave but ultimately remains, is heartbreaking in its simplicity and poignancy.

Hilary Summers’ performance as Nell, Hamm’s mother who lives in a dustbin with her husband Nagg, is a study in quiet tragedy. Though her role is relatively small, Summers imbues Nell with a deep sense of loss and sorrow. Her mezzo-soprano voice, warm and expressive, conveys the character’s fading memories of a better time, long before the accident that confined her to the bin. Summers’ portrayal is deeply moving, particularly in her interactions with Nagg, as the two reminisce about their past life together.

Nell’s decline is both physical and emotional, and Summers captures this with a delicate, understated performance. Her voice, though soft, carries immense emotional weight, particularly in the moments when she speaks of love and memory. The relationship between Nell and Nagg, tender yet tinged with regret, provides a poignant contrast to the more combative dynamic between Hamm and Clov. Summers’ portrayal of Nell’s quiet acceptance of her fate is one of the opera’s most affecting moments, reminding us that even in this desolate world, love and loss still hold power.

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As Nagg, the legless father confined to a dustbin, Charles Workman brings a masterful mix of humor and pathos to his performance. His tenor voice, clear and bright, contrasts with the bleakness of the setting, providing moments of levity amidst the despair. Yet beneath Nagg's humor lies a deep sadness—his jokes and stories are a way of coping with the loss of his former life, and Workman skillfully brings out this underlying sense of grief.

Workman's interactions with Summers as Nell are particularly poignant. Their conversations, often filled with bittersweet nostalgia, reveal the remnants of a love that has endured even in the face of unimaginable hardship. Workman's portrayal of Nagg's attempts to cheer up Nell, to maintain some semblance of normalcy in their absurd situation, is both touching and tragic. His performance highlights the humanity of these characters, even as they are reduced to living in trash bins.

György Kurtág's score for *Fin de partie* is a masterpiece of restraint and precision. His use of silence is as important as the music itself, creating a sense of space and stillness that mirrors the static existence of the characters. The music is often fragmented, with sharp dissonances and brief, lyrical passages that never fully resolve, reflecting the unresolved nature of the characters' lives. Kurtág's sparse orchestration, often limited to a few instruments at a time, adds to the feeling of isolation and desolation.

What makes Kurtág's music so powerful is its ability to convey deep emotion through the simplest of means. A single note, a brief chord, or a sudden silence can speak volumes, and under Simone Young's direction, the orchestra brings out every nuance of the score. The music, like the characters, seems to be constantly searching for meaning, for resolution, yet it never quite arrives. This sense of searching, of reaching for something just out of reach, is what gives the opera its emotional depth and resonance.

In *Fin de partie*, György Kurtág has created a work of immense emotional and intellectual depth, one that captures the essence of Beckett's existential masterpiece while adding its own unique voice to the conversation. The cast, led by Georg Nigl and Philippe Sly, delivers performances of extraordinary power and subtlety, bringing these tragic, absurd characters to life with profound humanity. Under the expert baton of Simone Young, the orchestra navigates Kurtág's challenging score with precision and sensitivity, creating a soundscape that is as haunting as it is beautiful.

This production of the *Fin de partie* at the Vienna State Opera is a triumph—a dark, uncompromising work that challenges its audience to confront the bleakness of existence while finding moments of beauty and meaning within it. For fans of contemporary opera and Beckett alike, this is a must-see, a rare example of how music and theater can come together to create something truly transcendent.

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