

VII edición

Premios Fundación BBVA Fronteras del Conocimiento

BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards

7th edition

## The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Award goes to Hungarian composer György Kurtág, a past master of expressive intensity

- Kurtág, a contemporary of Ligeti, Stockhausen and Boulez whose work is an enduring touchstone in the music of today, remains active as a composer, with his first opera currently in preparation
- His works “cross the borders between spontaneity and reflection, between formalism and expression” in the words of the jury's citation
- Kurtág demands of his interpreters that they “understand the structure of the written piece; the music ‘speaks’, tells us many things, and has the same syntax as the text”

**Madrid, February 10, 2015.-** The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Award in the Contemporary Music category goes in this seventh edition to the Hungarian composer György Kurtág, whose work stands out, in the view of the jury, for its “rare expressive intensity.” “The novel dimension of his music,” the citation continues, “lies not in the material he uses but in its spirit, the authenticity of its language, and the way it crosses borders between spontaneity and reflection, between formalism and expression.”

Kurtág is a major presence in Europe's contemporary music scene, and one of the outstanding names from the generation of Ligeti, Stockhausen or Boulez. It was Pierre Boulez, precisely, who helped bring him to international attention in 1981, when his Ensemble Intercontemporain premiered *Messages de feu Demoiselle Trousova*, a Kurtág piece for soprano and chamber ensemble. Kurtág's language is personal and intimate, while acknowledging a deliberate debt to such great masters and towering figures as Guillaume de Machaut, Bach, Beethoven, Berg or Messiaen.

According to the jury, Kurtág's voice, “defies any system, accepts no compromise, and has traced a path independent from the mainstream. Today it stands as an alternative to a vision of history apparently confined to the opposition between innovation and a return to old models, between a music

withdrawn into itself and a music that aims to communicate as broadly as possible."

"Kurtág's music has the ability to condense the most complex meaning into a handful of notes, to reduce it to the essence of musical expression, achieving a concentrated expressiveness with a minimum of material," remarks Ranko Markovic, jury secretary and Head of the BA in Music Program at Zurich University of the Arts.

For the jury members, "Kurtág's vocal work is a central part of his catalogue, as is his key relationship with poetry; a poetry that reflects his lyrical yet laconic music. The list of writers he has put to music offers a landscape of universal poetry, in a variety of languages where Hungarian rubs shoulders with German, Russian, Romanian, French and English."

György Kurtág (Transylvania, 1926) began studying piano in 1940 with Magda Kardos and composition with Max Eisikovits. In 1946 he moved to Budapest, where he studied composition with Sándor Veress and Ferenc Farkas, piano with Pál Kadosa and chamber music with Leo Weiner. From 1957 to 1958, he lived in Paris, in flight from the deprivations and censorship of the Stalinist regime. There he attended the classes of Olivier Messiaen and Darius Milhaud and met psychologist Marianne Stein, an encounter that, he says, changed his life. These influences, and his contact with the Domaine Musical led by Pierre Boulez, imbued him with the techniques of the Second Viennese School – Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern – and particularly that school's accent on concision. While stopping off in Cologne on his way back to Budapest, Ligeti introduced him to Stockhausen's *Gruppen* for three orchestras, a work that would profoundly shape his compositional thinking. Shortly after his return, he wrote the String Quartet he thinks of as his opus 1.

Professor of piano, then of chamber music at the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest from 1967 until his retirement in 1986, he continues to pursue his pedagogical and concertante work. His passion for teaching and quest for a new pedagogical model resonates strongly in his collection of piano works *Játékok* (1973-1976), written for children and inspired by their games. At the core of Kurtág's work is his fondness for small forms, as in his *Microludes* (1977-1978), a set of miniatures for string quartet. He is also the author of tiny vocal pieces, discovering in the voice an instrument full of new possibilities that go beyond its traditional narrative or operatic functions. These short forms are often organized into cycles; the case of *Messages de feu Demoiselle Trousova* for soprano and ensemble (1967-1980) or *Les Propos de Peter Bornemisza*, op. 7 (1963-1968), both clearly post-Webernian in style. Kurtág is also preoccupied with semantics. This comes across in his settings of poems by Pilinszky, Dalos, Kafka or Beckett, where he strives to draw out the recitational aspects of his literary sources, as an aid to their unity and intelligibility.

Chamber music is where he feels most at home in his teaching and his composition, including frequent pieces for the cimbalom, a traditional Hungarian instrument. *Duos* (1960-1961) and *Szálkák* (1973) are examples of this kind of work. With the exceptions of *Stele* (1994) for large orchestra, a commission from Claudio Abbado, and his *...concertante...* op. 42, for violin, viola and orchestra (2003), Kurtág rarely writes for large ensembles, preferring to focus his energies on chamber formations, which offer a quicker route to the essence he is pursuing; the dramatic effectiveness he seeks. He is currently working on his first ever opera, *Fin de partie*, based on Samuel Beckett's original text.

Kurtág has a predilection for the short phrase, in which he seeks the distillation of his expressive purpose. This is reflected in his ingenious notation: in *Játékok*, particularly, he tries out all types of games of his own and others' devising, as if immersed in a huge laboratory experiment. Many of these games conjure the sheer pleasure of performance, presented invariably as a form of release. What the author wants is the emotional engagement of his interpreters, whose imagination he inflames while prodding them to use their initiative. For his games enshrine a transmutation from pedagogical exercise to everything learnt in the journey that is life.

### **Condensation and fierce standards**

Another key to Kurtág's music is the allusion to the music of other composers from the Middle Ages to the present day. He establishes a kind of dialectic relationship with the past, which may stray at times into commentary or critique, but is mostly a homage to the music being cited in a renewed context, in which he ceaselessly explores the cultural meaning embedded in these borrowings. His references run from allusions to evocations of every genre and style, and yet he manages to bring them all within his own singular universe. Again we perceive a subtle reference to the intimate or private sphere, in which loss and its meaning are perceptibly present. A certain nostalgia that grows stronger with the years, as those lived emotions find expression in his music.

Kurtág is exacting with his interpreters and as a coach, but above all with himself. This attitude derives in part from his profound cultural and human understanding, which allows him to juxtapose layers of tradition in works of an intensely condensed musicality and blistering communicative force that also place high demands on the performer.

In many of his concerts, Kurtág and Márta Kinsker, his wife and inseparable companion, have played works by great composers in his arrangements for four-handed piano, which he interlaces with his own compositions in a unique style that weaves together micro-forms and diverse idioms and techniques. It is in the supreme elegance of these performances – interpretation and composition intimately linked – that we perceive the essence of his genius.

Kurtág is an honorary member of learned academies in Europe and the United

States, and has completed spells as composer in residence with many European orchestras, including the Berlin Philharmonic. His numerous distinctions include the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale (2009) and the Gold Medal of the Royal Philharmonic Society of London (2013).

### About the BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards

The BBVA Foundation promotes, funds and disseminates world-class scientific research and artistic creation, in the conviction that science, culture and knowledge hold the key to building a better future for people. The Foundation implements its programs in partnership with leading scientific and cultural organizations in Spain and abroad, striving to identify and prioritize those projects with the power to move forward the frontiers of the known world.

The BBVA Foundation established its Frontiers of Knowledge Awards in 2008 to recognize the authors of outstanding contributions and radical advances in a broad range of scientific and technological areas congruent with the knowledge map of the late 20th and 21st centuries and, representing cultural creativity at its expressive height, the area of music. The Awards also reserve space for two central challenges of the present, those of climate change and development cooperation. Their **eight categories** include classical areas like *Basic Sciences (Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics)* and *Biomedicine*, and other, more recent areas characteristic of our time, ranging from *Information and Communication Technologies, Ecology and Conservation Biology, Climate Change and Economics, Finance and Management* to *Development Cooperation* and the innovative artistic realm of *music, both classical and of our time*.

The **juries** in each category are made up of leading international experts in their respective fields, who arrive at their decisions in a wholly independent manner, applying internationally recognized metrics of excellence. The BBVA Foundation is aided in the organization of the awards by the **Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)**, the country's premier multidisciplinary research body. As well as designating each jury chair, the CSIC is responsible for appointing the Technical Evaluation Committees that undertake an initial assessment of candidates and draw up a reasoned shortlist for the consideration of the juries.

Committee members in the Contemporary Music category were Antonio Ezquerro Esteban, Tessa Wendy Knighton Bolton and Josep Martí Pérez of the Institución Milá y Fontanals (CSIC), under the supervision of the council's Social Sciences and Humanities Coordinator, José Antonio Berenguer Sánchez.

### Contemporary Music jury

The jury in this category was chaired by **Philippe Albèra**, Director of Éditions Contrechamps (France), with **Ranko Markovic**, Professor and Head of the BA in Music Program at Zurich University of the Arts (Switzerland) acting as secretary. Remaining members were **Cristóbal Halffter**, composer, conductor and member of the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando (Spain) and 2009 BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge laureate in Contemporary Music; **Martin**

**Kaltenecker**, Professor of Musicology at Université Paris Diderot (France); **Tilman Kuffenkeuler**, General Manager with the Radio Symphony Orchestra Berlin (Germany); and **Paolo Pinamonti**, Director of the Teatro de la Zarzuela (Spain).

### **Previous laureates**

The award in the sixth edition went to U.S. composer **Steve Reich** for “bringing forth a new conception of music, based on the use of realist elements from the realm of daily life and others drawn from the traditional music of Africa and Asia.” The previous year’s winner in the same category was **Pierre Boulez** for “his influence both as a composer and a key figure engaging in every aspect of musical reflection and transmission.” The award in the fourth edition went to Italian composer **Salvatore Sciarrino** for “renewing the possibilities of instrumental and vocal music and the singularity of his sound materials,” in the words of the jury’s citation. Preceding them were **Helmut Lachenmann** for a creative output that has “enlarged the world of sounds in the last fifty years in a way unmatched by any other contemporary composer” and **Cristóbal Halffter** who, the jury said, “since the late 1950s and early 1960s has made a major contribution to the reintroduction of Spanish music into the world of contemporary music.”

### **UPCOMING AWARD ANNOUNCEMENTS**

<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>DATE</b>
<b>Economics, Finance and Management</b>	February 17, 2015
<b>Development Cooperation</b>	February 24, 2015

#### LAUREATE'S FIRST DECLARATIONS AND IMAGES

A video recording of the new laureate's first interview on receiving news of the award is available from the Atlas FTP with the following name and coordinates:

Server: **213.0.38.61**

Username: **AgenciaAtlas4**

Password: **premios**

The name of the video is:

"PREMIO FRONTERAS DEL CONOCIMIENTO EN MÚSICA CONTEMPORÁNEA"

In the event of connection difficulties, please contact Alejandro Martín at ATLAS:

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