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**Translating the abstract: building a ‘language of movement’
from the text and music of György Kurtág’s *Kafka Fragments*
(Op. 24) for soprano and violin.**

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DMus, 2026

Abstract

This project explores an embodied interpretation of György Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*, a modernist musical work that uniquely sets abstract text fragments by Kafka within epigrammatic musical vignettes designed for soprano and violin. Drawing on my formal training in classical vocal performance, as well as my extensive experience with contemporary vocal repertoire, I aim to reconcile the inherent challenges that arise when staging an abstract, text-driven work, all while avoiding the imposition of additional narrative layers that could detract from the original intent. My approach focuses on accentuating the complexity of the score while decoding the cryptic idiom through both a vocal and physical lens, along with the use of reflective diaries. Moreover, my scholarly contribution is in the area of embodied physical performance of abstract chamber music.

My research traces the intricate creative process involved in learning *Kafka Fragments*, emphasising the interrelationship between traditional bel canto vocal techniques and the innovative demands of contemporary vocal writing. In addition to achieving vocal mastery, my research incorporates the element of movement, particularly informed by Vsevolod Meyerhold's biomechanics. This integration is essential for generating an expressive physical language that complements and enhances the vocal interpretation of the piece. By thoughtfully integrating these various elements, I seek to develop a performance practice that remains faithful to the work's abstract aesthetic while simultaneously offering a unique embodied response to its profound text and music. Through this exploration, I aspire to produce a performance that not only captures the essence of Kafka's fragmented thoughts but also engages the audience on a deeper level. The combination of vocal techniques and physical movement aims to illuminate the emotional and intellectual depth of the text, allowing for a richer interpretation that resonates with contemporary audiences. Ultimately, my goal is to contribute to the understanding of how contemporary vocal and physical practices can interact in innovative ways, particularly in works that challenge traditional narrative forms and engage with abstract concepts.

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Introduction

Motivation and Context

This project originated in 2016 during a week-long residency in which I studied György Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments* at Snape Maltings, Aldeburgh, with violinist Mayah Kadish. I wanted to present this abstract modernist work without staging it as an opera or simply performing the work as a recital. I was particularly interested in *Kafka Fragments* because of the urgency of the text. The work consists of 40 extracts of Kafka's text extracted from letters, diaries, aphorisms, notebooks, and unpublished writings, set concisely to short fragments of music, lasting just under an hour. 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. For example, Peter Sellars's Royal Opera House production at the Linbury Studio Theatre (2013) applied the narrative of cleaning and cleanliness to the work as a whole, assigning each movement of the piece to a mundane household chore. Kurtág has spoken of suppressing a tendency toward theatrical gesture in his practice, but has since written a full opera, *Fin de partie*, based on Beckett's play *Endgame* for La Scala, Milan (2018).¹ My engagement with the piece is a response to the fundamental elements of the piece's construction – Kafka's abstract yet profound text, illuminated by Kurtág's concise and specific setting to the soprano voice and violin (a combination echoing his roots in Hungarian folk music magnified through a contemporary classical lens) – in adding interpretative and creative layers to the performance through vocal interpretation and movement. My formal performance training is in classical vocal performance and applying acting techniques to stage work, while my professional experience spans classical recitals, opera, and international ensemble work, as well as interpreting graphic scores and contemporary vocal repertoire. It is from this position that I present an embodied interpretation of *Kafka Fragments* and reflect on the process of creation as it relates to the development of an associated language of movement.

Research Questions

1. What are the vocal implications of staging Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*?
 - a. How does the musical and performative language of *Kafka Fragments* relate to the bel canto tradition?
 - b. What are the musical challenges of performing within an abstract modernist idiom?
2. Where and how might movement enhance the expressive potential of *Kafka Fragments*?
 - a. What schools of movement best serve the musical text?

¹ Williams, A.E. (1999) 'The literary sources of Kurtág's fragment form', *Contemporary Music Review*, 18(2), pp. 141–150.

3. Considering the work through a feminist lens, how do Kafka's texts relate to the female performing persona?

Research Aims

My aim through this project is to resolve some of the inherent tensions around staging an abstract (and 'unstageable') work: clarifying and accentuating the rich material of the inherently complex score, but seeking not to impose any additional narrative. To quote Quigley:

The contemporary trope of theatre and performance that we can do anything on-stage, that everything is stageable, is paradoxically tempered with staging what is unstageable... this chimera and contingent term presents a shifting terrain of language, time and context.²

Thus, when one attempts to stage the abstract, they risk exposing the limits of theatre itself. This act becomes a meta-commentary; the audience sees not just the subject but the struggle of representation, and that tension is deeply theatrical. The impossibility of fully staging something forces the use of suggestion and metaphor, leaving audiences to fill in the gaps, making the experience more active and personal. For example, Beckett's *Not I* stages consciousness through fragmented speech rather than literal depiction – its power lies in what cannot be fully shown³. Inspired by the significant influence of Jane Manning's *Voicing Pierrot* project, I aim to start at the beginning of the journey, tracing my creative and technical development through the vocal process of mastering *Kafka Fragments* and the ways in which it can be presented: decoding the cryptic idiom of the work, searching for raw meaning within the text and music, and responding with intertextual creativity as I generate movement from my engagement with the piece. As Beckles Willson states, 'In *Kafka Fragments*... the search for Truth is unmistakable, writ disconcertingly large'.⁴ My own journey is to illuminate these truths through mastery of the work.

Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments* is acknowledged to be a technically demanding piece for a singer. Of the first performance, McLay writes, 'the sheer stamina required must mean that performances will remain something of a rarity',⁵ while a review of Sellars's 2005 staging (mentioned above) states that 'the

² Quigley, K. (2020) *Performing the unstageable: Success, imagination, failure*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

³ Beckett, S. (1989) 'Not I', in *The complete dramatic works*. London: Faber and Faber.

⁴ Beckles Willson, R. (2007) *Ligeti, Kurtág and Hungarian music during the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

⁵ McLay, M.P. (1987) 'Kurtág's "Kafka Fragments"', *Tempo*, 163, pp. 45–47.

work's technical demands can be punishing for the singer'.⁶ In the context of my formal and professional training, I am also particularly interested in the use of traditional bel canto vocal technique as it relates to contemporary writing for voice. The extreme vocal range of *Kafka Fragments* requires a solid grounding of singing technique, vocal dexterity, and accuracy in both rhythm and pitch. Kurtág's meticulous and economical composition style assures the singer that what is written is entirely deliberate and with purpose. In my experience, I have noticed on occasion that complex notations can be interpreted by the performer as a vocal gesture in common 'contemporary music' performance practice, whether sanctioned by the composer or not. Often, singers will interpret complicated passages in looser terms, thinking about the broader shape of the gesture rather than concentrating on the accuracy of individual pitches and rhythms. My aim is to approach the music with commitment to accuracy, applying the beauty of line expected in the traditional bel canto style and bringing the voice 'at one' with the body. I will explore these ideas further in Chapter One.

Chapter Two will document my enquiry into physical movement and explore the application of Meyerhold's principles of biomechanics, an early Soviet school of theatre based on the economy of physical movement. I will explore different techniques used in these schools of actor training in expressive movement workshops with one of my supervisors, and then work such movement into my own practice, determining which aspects best serve my interpretation of the text and music. Meyerhold's biomechanics was developed as an 'antidote'⁷ to Stanislavski's methods of psychological realism, focused on the efficiency and expressivity of the physical body to generate emotion as a result rather than a tool. Meyerhold's training method via the medium of études fits with Kurtág's miniature and fragmented form, which compelled me to combine the two initially and then explore how the movement styles develop as the musical language becomes more cohesive throughout the cycle. The aesthetic link between Meyerhold's biomechanics and the aesthetics of György Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments* can be understood through their shared exploration of fragmentation, physical expression, and the existential themes inherent in Kafka's narratives. Meyerhold's biomechanics emphasises the body as a primary vehicle for communication, advocating for exaggerated movements and precise gestures that convey emotional and psychological states. This approach aligns seamlessly with the fragmented structure of Kurtág's composition, which distils Kafka's text into brief, poignant musical vignettes that reflect their disjointed nature. The mechanical and stylised nature of Meyerhold's technique can enhance the absurdity and emotional weight of Kurtág's work, allowing performers to embody the subject matter in a visceral manner. Both Meyerhold and Kurtág engage with the idea of the body as a site of meaning, where physical expression becomes a means of navigating the complexities of human experience.

⁶ Eichler, J. (2005) 'Fragments of Kafka in song', *New York Times*.

⁷ Baldwin, J. (1995) *Meyerhold theatrical biomechanics: An acting technique for today*.

Similar to broader performance aesthetics of the 20th century, such as Grotowski's 'poor theatre', I will explore how Meyerhold, Kafka, and Kurtág are all illuminated by a shared aesthetic austerity of musical, vocal, and physical languages in which the fundamental components of each discipline are the foremost point of concern.

Kafka Fragments offers a unique lens through which to explore themes of gender fluidity, power dynamics, and the complexities of identity, inviting a revaluation of how gender operates within the realms of music and performance. Chapter Three will explore the intersection of *Kafka Fragments* with the female performing body, particularly from my own perspective as a soprano performer. I will investigate how Kurtág's music and Kafka's texts resonate with a feminist perspective, particularly regarding women's experiences in patriarchal systems, using ideas from Spender's theory of man-made language. This includes the nuances of the female operatic body, considering the disconnect between voice and body in traditional opera as articulated by Novak. I will examine how language is gendered, drawing on feminist literature to illustrate how linguistic constructs can reinforce gender roles. The performance of *Kafka Fragments* is positioned as an opportunity for the soprano to assert agency and challenge traditional gender expectations through her vocal expression. The soprano's engagement with the material is seen as a subversion of traditional gender roles, allowing her to reclaim and reinterpret Kafka's complex narratives. In addition, I will discuss the vocal demands of the work, noting that Kurtág's composition allows the soprano to transcend conventional portrayals of femininity, using the extended vocal range of the piece to convey deeper emotional truths.

Kafka Fragments (Op. 24, 1985–87) occupies a pivotal position in Kurtág's oeuvre, synthesising his lifelong preoccupation with textual concision and existential ambiguity. Comprising 40 aphoristic movements for soprano and violin, the cycle exemplifies Kurtág's radical commitment to the fragment as both a formal and philosophical principle. This commitment is inseparable from the historical and ideological conditions that shaped his artistic trajectory: the cultural isolation of post-war Hungary, the aesthetic imperatives of socialist realism, and the subsequent encounter with Western modernism during his formative sojourn in Paris.

Kurtág's early career unfolded under the restrictive cultural policies of Communist Hungary, where the music of Schoenberg, late Stravinsky, and even Bartók was officially proscribed. His brief exile in Paris (1957–58) proved transformative, exposing him to Messiaen, Milhaud, and the sonic experiments of Stockhausen, as well as to the psychological insights of Marianne Stein, whose influence Kurtág acknowledged as decisive in overcoming a creative crisis. This encounter catalysed a rejection of his earlier works and the adoption of a compositional ethos grounded in rigour, self-scrutiny, and

radical economy of means. The super-condensed brevity of Webern's oeuvre and Ligeti's emergent micropolyphony provided further stimuli, reinforcing Kurtág's conviction that musical meaning could be distilled to its essence.

Within this ideological framework, *Kafka Fragments* emerges as a paradigmatic articulation of Kurtág's aesthetics. The choice of Kafka's texts – drawn from diaries, letters, and notebooks – reflects a profound affinity for linguistic incompleteness and ontological uncertainty. These fragments, oscillating between assertion and negation, resonate with Kurtág's own sense of artistic fragility and his scepticism toward totalising systems. As Kinderman observes, the cycle enacts an 'archetypal theme of wandering', a quest for meaning that remains perpetually deferred.⁸ This theme situates Kurtág within the broader existential discourse of post-war European modernism.

The cycle's four-part structure, articulated by two extended movements, juxtaposes extremes of vocal production, from sotto voce utterance to acerbic declamation, and exploits the violin as both accompanist and interlocutor. This instrumental choice, initially contingent upon practical circumstances, became integral to the work's dramaturgy, enabling a dialogic interplay that mirrors Kafka's oscillation between intimacy and estrangement. Recent scholarship underscores the organicity of Kurtág's compositional process, emphasising his sensitivity to textual nuance and his resistance to conventional song cycle teleology. Doyle's study,⁹ for instance, situates *Kafka Fragments* as a model of contemporary composition, highlighting its integration of extra-musical elements and its embodiment of an 'existential dramaturgy' predicated on discontinuity. Performance practice further illuminates the work's demands: recordings by Juliane Banse and András Keller exemplify the interpretive precision required to navigate its extremes of timbre, gesture, and spatiality.¹⁰ Banse's oscillation between speech and song, coupled with Keller's deployment of scordatura and timbral inflexion, renders audible the precariousness that underpins Kurtág's sonic world: a world in which every note is freighted with ontological weight.

In an era of interdisciplinary performance and digital hybridity, *Kafka Fragments* retains striking relevance. Its emphasis on corporeality and fragmentation anticipates current trends in devised theatre and experimental opera, while its radical economy of means offers a counterpoint to the excesses of postmodern spectacle. For performers and scholars alike, the cycle constitutes not merely a historical

⁸ Kinderman, W. (2012) 'Kurtág's Kafka Fragments and homage à R. Sch', in *The creative process in music from Mozart to Kurtág*. Illinois Scholarship Online.

⁹ Doyle, K. (2011) *György Kurtág's Kafka Fragments, OP. 24: Fragment as form*. Master's thesis. University of Louisville.

¹⁰ ECM Records. *György Kurtág: Kafka-Fragmente* – J. Banse (soprano), A. Keller (violin), ECM 1965 (2006).

artefact but a living laboratory for interrogating the limits of musical signification and the ethics of artistic vulnerability.

Kafka Fragments represents the culmination of a long evolution in his vocal writing, moving from the expansive, timbrally saturated lieder-theater of *Messages of the Late Miss R. V. Trousova* (Op. 17) through the chamber intimacy and absurdist humour of *Scenes from a Novel* (Op. 19) toward an extreme economy of means. Kurtág compresses Kafka's aphoristic texts into a radically fragmented dramaturgy, where every gesture carries structural and semantic weight. The violin functions not as accompaniment but as an equal partner, creating a two-voice micro-theater that oscillates between echo, commentary, and contradiction. This radical reduction of forces, combined with Kurtág's obsessive precision in rhythm, timbre, and silence, achieves an intensity that rivals the expressive scope of his larger ensemble works. *Kafka Fragments* is important because it crystallises Kurtág's aesthetic of fantastic economy, demonstrating how aphoristic form and microscopic detail can generate a universe of meaning, and it stands as one of the most influential statements of late twentieth-century vocal modernism.

Chapter One

Kafka Fragments and the Bel Canto Tradition

Kafka Fragments is a piece of abstract modernism in its aesthetic language, and is widely considered to be technically difficult to sing due to the physical demand and vocal risk for the singer inherent in the piece's extreme range, dramatic intensity, and rhythmical challenges. Therefore, I believe it is imperative to have a solid grounding in classical singing techniques in order to perform *Kafka Fragments*. I adopt the bel canto technique – the ideological basis for vocal teaching of all modern opera singers in the 21st century – to offer a fundamental set of skills to achieve an effective and vocally secure performance. While I intend to describe the bel canto style as a technical style and school, I will first briefly contextualise it within the history of vocal development within performance practice.

Defining bel canto technique

Bel canto has been defined by Willi Apel as 'the Italian vocal technique of the 18th century, with its emphasis on beauty of sound and brilliance of performance rather than dramatic expression or romantic emotion'.¹¹ It is important to remember the distinction between the bel canto era and the technique of bel canto singing. The origins of bel canto singing can be traced back to the early Baroque period, where the emphasis on expressive singing began to take shape. According to Celletti in his book *A History of Bel Canto*,¹² the technique developed significantly during the late 17th century and reached its peak in the 18th and early 19th centuries with composers such as Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti. These composers wrote operas that demanded a refined and flexible vocal technique capable of navigating complex melodic lines and ornamentation, but were still within the conventional melodic and harmonic structure. The bel canto era was marked by a shift away from the more declamatory style of early Baroque opera to a focus on melody and vocal embellishment. As Gossett notes,¹³ the rise of the castrati (male singers castrated before puberty to preserve their high vocal range) played a crucial role in the development of bel canto. The castrati's unique vocal abilities pushed composers to write increasingly challenging and elaborate vocal lines.

Dominico Corri, an influential figure in the bel canto tradition, provided significant insights into the characteristics and qualities of bel canto singing in his writing.¹⁴ Corri emphasised that bel canto is defined not only by technical proficiency but also by the beauty of tone and expressive musicality. He

¹¹ Apel, W. and Stolba, K. M. (1969) *Harvard dictionary of music*. 2nd edn., rev. and enl. Cambridge, Mass.

¹² Celletti, R. (1996) *A history of bel canto*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹³ Gossett, P. (2006) *Divas and scholars: Performing Italian opera*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁴ Corri, D. (1810) *The singer's preceptor*.

believed that the art of singing should allow for the natural expression of emotion, and he encouraged singers to connect deeply with the music and lyrics they performed. Corri described bel canto singing as an art form that requires a delicate balance between vocal agility and lyrical expression. He advocated for the importance of breath control, stating that proper management of breath is essential for achieving a smooth legato and dynamic phrasing. This emphasis on breath support aligns with the traditional values of bel canto, where the fluidity of sound and the seamless connection between notes are paramount. Moreover, Corri highlighted the significance of vowel formation and resonance in producing a beautiful tone. He asserted that singers should focus on clear articulation and the quality of their vocal sound, which should be sweet and pleasing to the ear. Corri's teachings encouraged singers to cultivate their individual voice while adhering to the stylistic nuances of the bel canto tradition, promoting a sense of elegance and refinement in their performances.

Bel canto singing is characterised by several key elements that distinguish it from other vocal techniques. These include smooth, legato phrasing, precise control of dynamics, and the ability to execute rapid scales, arpeggios, and other forms of vocal ornamentation. The technique also places a strong emphasis on breath control and support, which are essential for achieving the desired smoothness and evenness of tone. Firstly, legato (smooth, connected singing) is a defining feature of the bel canto technique. Singers are trained to produce a seamless flow of sound with no perceptible breaks between notes. This requires meticulous control of breath and the ability to maintain a consistent tone quality across the entire vocal range. In *The Art of Singing: Golden Voices of the Century*, James Stark explains that legato singing is achieved through a combination of proper breath support, vowel modification, and careful management of the vocal registers.¹⁵

Bel canto singers are distinguishable by their vocal agility and flexibility, which allow them to execute rapid runs, trills, and other forms of ornamentation with precision and ease. These embellishments, known as coloratura, are a hallmark of bel canto operas and require extensive training to master. Martha Elliott emphasises that coloratura passages should be executed with 'clarity and evenness, without compromising the overall legato line'.¹⁶ In *The Techniques of Singing*, Barbara Doscher discusses the importance of dynamic contrast in bel canto singing, noting that it adds expressiveness and emotional depth to the performance.¹⁷ Dynamic control, or the ability to vary the volume and intensity of the voice, is another essential aspect of bel canto singing. Singers must be able to produce a wide range of dynamics, from the softest pianissimo to the most powerful fortissimo, while maintaining a

¹⁵ Stark, J. (1999) *Bel canto: A history of vocal pedagogy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. xiii.

¹⁶ Elliot, M. (2006) *Singing in style: A guide to vocal performance practices*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

¹⁷ Doscher, B. (1994) *The functional unity of the singing voice*. Scarecrow Press.

consistent tone quality. This requires technical proficiency as well as a deep understanding of the emotional content of the music.

Bel canto is not only a method to display technical prowess; it is also deeply imbricated within an ideology of vocal performance as conveying the emotional and dramatic content of the music. Singers in the bel canto tradition, perhaps more than any other, are required to interpret the dramaturgy and expression of text and music in a way that communicates the character's emotions and motivations to the audience. This requires a deep understanding of the libretto and score, as well as the ability to infuse the performance with personal expression. 'The true art of bel canto', writes Richard Miller, 'lies in the ability to combine technical mastery with expressive interpretation'.¹⁸ The training of bel canto singers is a rigorous and highly specialised process that focuses on developing the technical skills and artistic sensibilities required for this demanding style of singing. Historically, vocal training during the bel canto era was conducted through apprenticeships with experienced singers and teachers, who would pass down their knowledge and techniques to the next generation. For example, Luciano Pavarotti went 'to study with Ettore Campogalliani in nearby Mantua. They worked together for three years, during which time the young tenor left his insurance job in order to devote himself exclusively to his singing studies'.¹⁹

Although it is important to remember that bel canto singing stems from a traditional technique, it comes into question when considering Kurtág's prioritisation of the text in *Kafka Fragments*. More specifically, the bel canto technique of beautiful phrasing and its emphasis on a smooth legato delivery does not necessarily directly relate to the extreme dynamic and dramatic range in such a modern and non-Italianate style. After the rise of the bel canto era, in the 1890s, the directors of the Bayreuth Festival implemented a distinctive style of Wagnerian singing that diverged significantly from the Italian ideals of bel canto. Termed 'sprechgesang' by its proponents and referred to as the 'Bayreuth bark'²⁰ by detractors, this new vocal approach emphasised the articulation of individual words within the composer's libretti, prioritising clarity and textual intelligibility. Although this was mainly an issue which arose from the production of big operatic productions in large-scale opera houses, where it was the 'near impossible to retain the legato line within the context of a meaningful theatricality', this can be applicable to the extremisms of modern writing and for the modern developed voice. As John Potter says:

¹⁸ Miller, R. (1996) *On the art of singing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁹ <https://www.pavarottiofficial.com/story-pavarotti-part-2/>

²⁰ Hilmes, O. (2011) *Cosima Wagner – The lady of Bayreuth*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

When voices get bigger, so do the vocal gesture required to carry the text. The pre-nineteenth-century small-scale refined singing in which glides were part of an individual's rhetorical and performing persona perhaps became exaggerated to the point of mannerism in some singers.²¹

This text-centric, anti-legato vocalism gained traction across German-speaking regions of Europe in the years leading up to World War I, marking a notable shift in vocal practice and interpretation within the operatic tradition. While it was considered to be a necessary rebuttal of traditional bel canto technique, it seems that looking back with a modern eye suggests that *sprechgesang* has its origins in bel canto singing through its reliance on foundational vocal techniques, its emphasis on emotional expression, and its evolution within the broader historical context of operatic performance. This connection illustrates how vocal practices adapt and transform while still drawing on established traditions, which is fundamental to my interpretation of *Kafka Fragments* in order to effectively present the full range of vocal production needed.

I also want to adequately define the term 'register' with regard to vocal production, as this is very relevant to the extended use of the soprano voice in *Kafka Fragments*. Prolific historic vocal technician Manuel García (1805–1906) is particularly pertinent to my studies of bel canto on the physical body. He emphasised the connection between the singer's body and voice, promoting ideas about the *appoggio* (support), which refers to the controlled use of breath to produce a steady and powerful sound:

By the word register, we understand a series of consecutive and homogeneous tones going from low to high, produced by the development of the same mechanical principle, and whose nature differs essentially from another series of tones equally consecutive and homogeneous produced by another mechanical principle. All the tones belonging to the same register are consequently of the same nature, whatever may be the modifications of timbre or of force to which one subjects them.²²

Talking about vocal technique opens up a multitude of conflicting opinions, so it is useful to note which particular sources may reinforce the way in which I discuss my vocal production. Sundberg interrogates the design and function of the singing voice.²³ He covers the definition of the voice, the

²¹ Potter, J. (2006) 'Beggar at the door: The rise and fall of portamento in singing', *Music & Letters*, 87(4), pp. 533.

²² García, M. (1984) 'Memoire on the human voice', in Paschke, D.V. (ed., trans.) *A complete treatise on the art of singing*. New York, p. xli.

²³ Sundberg, J. (1989) *The science of the singing voice*. Northern Illinois University Press.

voice organ, and essential practical uses for the voice (specifically breathing), the source of the voice, articulation, 'choral' voice, vocal disorders and speech, song, and emotion. The 'voice' is defined as sounds which are generated from the voice organ, associated with vibrating vocal folds and the vocal tract, as used by a singer as a musical instrument. His primary objective is to illustrate how the organ of the voice is built and functions uniquely for each person, with their timbre produced in a personal way. He illustrates breathing, phonating, and shaping, and how the alignment of these forms the basis for the ability to produce an infinite number of vocal sounds. He provides comprehensive diagrams to explain how the combination of the diaphragm and lungs supports the vocal folds in healthy oscillation, which in turn resonates in the vocal tract. The shape of the vocal tract can be changed by the lip, tongue, and jaw muscles in the form of articulation. The final part of the book covers breathing and how it can be measured objectively by lung volume, air flow, and air pressure, with a number of studies shown to illustrate this. It is noted that subglottic pressure is the key to phonation and that good control of the voice depends on good control of the muscles.

One of the fundamental aspects of bel canto training is the development of proper breath control and support. Singers are taught to use the diaphragm and other muscles of the respiratory system to manage the flow of air and maintain a steady stream of breath. This is essential for producing a smooth, even tone and for executing the rapid passages and embellishments characteristic of bel canto music. In *The Structure of Singing*, Richard Miller provides detailed exercises and techniques for developing breath control and support, emphasising their importance in achieving the desired vocal quality. Vocal exercises and warm-ups are a crucial part of bel canto training. These exercises are designed to develop the flexibility, agility, and strength of the vocal apparatus, as well as to improve breath control and support. Common exercises include scales, arpeggios, and trills, which are practised at various speeds and dynamics to build technical proficiency. In my own practice, I often sing scales: starting at a middle A, going down an octave, and returning to the middle A. I sing scales up on Italian vowels only, normally using the words 'amore' or 'amici'. This brings us to the ideas of vowel modification and resonance adjustment, which allow singers to produce a consistent tone quality across their entire vocal range. By subtly altering the shape of the vocal tract and the position of the tongue and lips, singers can achieve a more resonant and balanced sound. This is particularly important when transitioning between different vocal registers. In *Basics of Vocal Pedagogy*, Clifton Ware explains the principles of vowel modification and provides exercises for developing resonance and tonal consistency.²⁴

²⁴ Ware, C. (1998) *Basics of vocal pedagogy*. McGraw Hill.

The Voice-Body

The bel canto tradition has had a profound and lasting impact on the world of opera and vocal music. Even though the era of bel canto opera came to an end in the mid-19th century, with the rise of more dramatic and verismo styles, the principles and techniques of bel canto singing have had a significant influence on modern vocal pedagogy. Many of the exercises and methods used in contemporary vocal training are derived from bel canto traditions and their emphasis on breath control, legato singing, and dynamic contrast as central tenets in the training of classical singers. The rigorous training and pedagogical methods developed during the bel canto era continue to be relevant and influential in modern vocal pedagogy due to their efficacy as overarching ideologies in the operatic world and the inherited performance practices of specific opera traditions and works. Through the revival of bel canto operas and the application of bel canto principles to other genres, the legacy of bel canto singing remains an enduring and vital part of the vocal arts, especially when aiming to achieve the extreme demands of abstract modernist music such as *Kafka Fragments*.

Bel canto technique has a firm basis in a voice being situated ‘on’ the breath, an aspect of vocal knowledge which has only recently become important to musicology through a recent ‘embodied turn’ in scholarship that considers some of the musical philosophies behind sound and the body during performance. Mladen Dolar, for instance, was seminal in considering the relationship between the voice and the body during vocalisation, and how the ephemeral voice is supported by the body in order to be ‘assumed’. The voice is considered an ‘object’²⁵ and is what connects bodies and languages together; that language is attached or ‘tethered’ in some way to the body through the voice. As my practice began to embrace movement through this project, the physicality of my body as not only a vehicle for the breath and voice but also a separate entity became a vital foundation to thinking about the relationship between singing and movement in *Kafka Fragments*. Dolar seems to be developing Pierre Schaeffer’s concept of the acousmatic voice in his work²⁶ – ‘acousmatic’ referring to a sound whose source cannot be identified – in considering the almost ventriloquistic nature of historic opera singing practices. The acousmatic voice structurally produces ‘divine effects’, for example, the omnipotent voice of God in the Old Testament. However, with the rise of modern media such as the telephone and the radio, the uncanny nature of the acousmatic voice has lost a certain amount of its mystery. While Dolar suggests a number of ways in which the source of a voice can be sought and demystified, he fundamentally argues that ‘disacoustamization’ cannot exist; even if the bodily vehicle for the voice is identified, the root of the sound is still concealed. Dolar argues that the voice is essentially ‘ventriloquism’, due to the fact that the relation to one’s appearance and the voice itself do not

²⁵ Dolar, M. (2006) *The voice and nothing more*. The MIT Press.

²⁶ Schaeffer, P. (1966) *Traité des objets musicaux*. Pierres vives.

‘match’, and it is only when we adapt to the combination of the two that they coherently align. It is suggested that the voice which ties language to the body is a paradox, as the voice does not belong to either. Hence, it is interesting to consider the voice as an independent entity in song, especially given Dolar’s suggestion that the voice ‘detaches’ itself from the body when sound is made, while good singing technique is often described as being ‘on the body’.

Freya Jarman-Ivens extends Dolar’s thinking by trying to locate the role of the voice within the marriage of language and music.²⁷ In this context, vocal identification is to imagine oneself as the creator of the voice while listening to sung music; more than that, one is ‘inserted, body and soul, into what they hear’. Simon Frith suggests ‘we assign [recorded voices] bodies, we imagine their physical production’. As commented upon by Dolar, Jarman-Ivens highlights that the production of the voice has ‘important invisible elements’. On the subject of voice as an object, she argues that while we are identifying voices, we are attempting to live the moment of ‘loss’ of the voice from the body, and to ritualise it. There is an important point made about being able to distinguish unique individuals’ voices, and the notion of being ‘brought into being’ by being able to clearly distinguish one’s own voice from that of the Other. This separation is essential to the understanding and structure of our own subjectivity; however, if this is the case, why do we need to identify with the voice of the Other? Jarman-Ivens suggests that it could be a desire to possess the voice’s creator, to be the voice itself, or to inhabit the sound as one’s own voice. With regards to our own recorded voices, what we hear in our voice is not necessarily reflective of what Others may hear of the same recording, referred to as a ‘mind’s ear’.

Despite the decline of bel canto opera in the mid-19th century with the rise of more dramatic styles, the techniques developed during this era – such as breath control, legato singing, and dynamic contrast – continue to shape modern vocal training. This legacy is particularly significant in the context of performing *Kafka Fragments*, which demand a nuanced vocal approach. In the context of developing a language of movement for *Kafka Fragments*, these themes of voice and embodiment become particularly relevant. The physicality of movement can serve as an extension of vocal expression, creating a holistic performance that bridges the gap between sound and action. By integrating movement informed by the principles of bel canto and the insights of contemporary musicology, I aim to create a dynamic relationship between my body and voice while performing the abstract, fragmented texts of Kafka. This approach not only enhances the emotional depth of the performance but also allows for a richer exploration of identity and subjectivity, reflecting the complexities inherent in both the music

²⁷ Jarman-Ivens, F. (2009) ‘Vocal identification and modern subjectivity’, *Music and the Performance of Identity II*, 13(2).

and the text. Ultimately, the interplay between voice, body, and movement in performing *Kafka Fragments* highlights the enduring legacy of the bel canto tradition while also embracing modern interpretations of vocal and physical expression. This synthesis fosters a deeper understanding of the relationship between sound and movement, enriching the overall performance and offering a unique embodied response to Kurtág's profound work.

Beyond Bel Canto

Linda Hirst questions how the contemporary composer and performer can work collaboratively in different ways to achieve a deeper quality of interpretation from the point of view of a singer.²⁸ Hirst also investigates the development of technically challenging vocal requirements in music, from Monteverdi trills in *L'Orfeo* to overtone singing in Stockhausen's *Stimmung*. She argues that from the 20th century, music 'moved away from defining mainstream singing in terms only of *bel canto*'²⁹. She considers the possibilities that graphic scores open up the potential of infinite improvised styles; such is the case in Cathy Berberian's interpretations of Berio's *Sequenza III*, in which she generates new music traditions. Hirst outlines her experience working with German composer Helmut Lachenmann, and his style of micro-management of her production of the vocal sounds in *temA* in which 'the voice rarely sings in the traditional sense, but the singer's breathing and the ritual associated with that particular physical action, has the central role of the theatricality of the piece'³⁰.

Hirst considers alternatives to 20th century bel canto and how singers outside the mainstream engage with other vocal traditions, 'in which there are fewer constraints on the vocabulary of sounds and vocal gestures which the singer can use expressively'. Despite this departure from the traditional, she argues that singers are able to make interesting vocal things happen out of familiar material, partly through advances in vocal performance technology (e.g. the microphone) and interconnected globalisation (e.g. the internet) which have exposed musicians to different kinds of vocal traditions other than those handed down in person. She asks why new creative responses are so radical as to suggest new definitions of performance practice, in that the incorporation of new vocal sounds means choosing ones not necessarily associated with singing. They stem from the freedom of improvisation as an 'essential creative tool', which can 'unlock the appropriate vocal responses a singer requires to meet the need of a new performance situation'. She also suggests that vocal sounds from everyday life and culture can be used by composers to great effect. Moreover, she asks how the phrase 'extended vocal technique' supports the concept of 'alternative voices', and the question this raises of notation.

²⁸ Hirst, L. (2000) 'Alternative Voices: Contemporary Vocal Technique', in *The Cambridge Companion to Singing. Cambridge Companions to Music*, vol. 26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 192–203.

²⁹ Hirst, L. (2000) "Alternative Voices: Contemporary Vocal Technique", pp. 192-203

³⁰ Hirst, L. (2000) "Alternative Voices: Contemporary Vocal Teechnique" pp. 192-203

With extended vocal practices comes creativity but not always freedom, and it is interesting to disentangle ideas of control and exactitude in aesthetic idioms from technical or notional ones. What would the avant-garde, graphically notated vocal works of John Cage (e.g. *Aria*) and Cathy Berberian (e.g. *Stripsody*) look like if they were notated? Soprano Tony Arnold says of the *Kafka Fragments* score:

I absolutely love that the score itself has nothing notated that would be classified as an ‘extended vocal technique’, yet what Kurtág has implied through the gestural setting of the text, when executed with singular purpose according to soundworld that the text evokes, results in extremities of vocal timbre that sound like they might be somehow ‘extra-musical’. In practice, these moments arise quite organically. Not that they are easy... but that there is such an internal logic to the composition that the sounds are inevitable, provided the singer has digested Kurtág’s harmonic and rhythmic language.³¹

Extended vocal technique in abstract expressionism presents a complex duality: it requires singers to be acutely specific and accurate, thereby imposing certain restrictions, yet it simultaneously empowers them by expanding their expressive capabilities. This paradox lies at the heart of the technique’s application in contemporary music and can be explored through its demands, its potential for expressive depth, and its impact on the performer, as discussed by Cathy Berberian.³² Extended vocal techniques encompass a range of unconventional vocal sounds and methods, including sprechgesang, rapid oscillation between pitches, sudden dynamic changes, and other non-traditional uses of the voice. These techniques demand a high level of precision and control from the performer. The notational and performative accuracy required for extended vocal techniques is significant; singers must have an intimate understanding of their instrument, as small deviations can drastically alter the intended sound. This precision is necessary to achieve the desired timbral and textural effects that are characteristic of abstract expressionist music. Kârpâti discusses how Kurtág’s use of extended vocal techniques demands exceptional precision from performers to achieve the emotional and sonic effects he envisions.³³

Extended vocal technique requires singers to produce sounds that go beyond traditional singing methods. These techniques may include overtones, multiphonics, vocal fry, and other unconventional

³¹ Ihnen, M. (2013) *6 Questions re: ‘Kafka Fragments’ with soprano Tony Arnold*. Sybaritic Singer.

³² Berberian, C. (1976) ‘New vocal techniques’, *Perspectives of New Music*, 14(1), pp. 42–50.

³³ Kurtág, G. (1974) *The sayings of Peter Bornemisza, Op. 7 Kârpâti*.

methods (see Stone³⁴). The precision required to execute these techniques correctly imposes certain restrictions on the singer. Each sound must be produced with exactness, adhering to the composer's specifications and the score's demands. Furthermore, as Eric Clarke notes, 'Performing is about taking risks, sharing joy, and communicating deeply with an audience. It's a moment of connection that transcends words and touches the soul'.³⁵ While risk-taking is a vehicle for exciting music-making, the requirement for precision can be seen as restrictive, as it leaves little room for deviation from the composer's intentions. Rink argues: 'To insist on a single, definitive realisation of a composer's intentions is to deny music its fundamental dynamism and capacity for renewal'.³⁶

This presents a rich and complex tension for the performer. Unlike composer-invented symbols and graphic notation in some modern vocal music (John Cage's *Aria* being a seminal example) that 'seek to convey musical gestures visually, with some element of onomatopoeic equivalence', traditional notation (as we find in *Kafka Fragments*) still requires a degree of gestural interpretation and mediation by the performer. The singer must balance the need for accuracy with the desire for creative 'translation' of the work. This balance is achieved through a deep understanding of both the technical demands and the expressive possibilities of the vocal techniques employed (Miller, 2008). While *Kafka Fragments* is technically demanding and requires extreme vocal range and stamina, it would not necessarily be described wholly as extended vocal technique, as its demands remain within a prescriptive melodic and tonal framework typical of Western classical music, which separates it from other seminal works designed for soprano in non-conventional notation from a similar period.

The singer's journey through abstract expressionist works such as this one is therefore one of constant negotiation between restriction and empowerment, as the singer has to 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 expressionist approach, where the boundaries of traditional art forms are pushed to their limits, resulting in a richer and more nuanced artistic experience.³⁷ Jay Bernstein suggests – via the philosophical aesthetics of Adorno – that this complex and nuanced form of entanglement is, in fact, essential to the aesthetic goals of abstract expressionism.³⁸ He argues that in abstract expressionism, philosophical concepts are realised in art practices in a way which provides profound tools for enabling us to decipher who we are and

³⁴ Stone, K. (1982) *Music notation in the twentieth century: A practical guidebook*. W.W. Norton & Company

³⁵ Clarke, E. (1996) *Ways of listening: An ecological approach to the perception of musical meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³⁶ Rink, J. (2002) *Musical performance: A guide to understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁷ Taruskin, R. (2009) *The Oxford history of Western music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³⁸ Bernstein, J. (1996) 'The death of sensuous particulars: Adorno and abstract expressionism', *Radical Philosophy*, 76, Mar/Apr.

to contextualise ourselves in the world. He uses T.J. Clark's 'In Defence of Abstract Expressionism' as a source to discuss the effects of why we are unable to 'let abstract expressionism go', which in turn is halting the development of contemporary art. Without the progress of art, the world becomes disenchanted. This may provide a useful way to position myself within the abstract world of Kafka while using my body as a vehicle for sound. Imagining my journey through abstract expressionist works as a constant negotiation between restriction and empowerment can yield a valuable framework for positioning oneself within the rhetorical and abstract world of Kafka while performing Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*. This duality of exploration and constraint reflects the complexities inherent in both Kafka's fragmented narratives and Kurtág's musical interpretation, allowing one to engage deeply with the text and music while embracing the physicality of their performance. By recognising that the work serves as a site for boundary-pushing exploration, I can approach *Kafka Fragments* not merely as a rigid structure but as an opportunity for artistic freedom.

This perspective encourages me to experiment with how the body can serve as a vehicle for sound, allowing movements to embody the emotional and psychological nuances of Kafka's writing. The abstract nature of the work aligns with the core principles of abstract expressionism, where the boundaries of traditional art forms are challenged, creating a richer artistic experience. In this context, Bernstein's insights into the philosophical aesthetics of Adorno are particularly relevant. By understanding that the complexities and nuances of abstract expressionism offer profound tools for self-discovery and contextualisation within the world, one can approach their performance as a means of exploring their own identity and experiences. This self-exploration can manifest through the physicality of the singer's movements, which can communicate the emotional weight of Kafka's text while simultaneously reflecting their personal interpretation of the music. Moreover, the idea that the inability to 'let abstract expressionism go' is linked to a stunted progression in contemporary art emphasises the importance of embracing the tension between tradition and innovation. This tension can be mirrored in a singer's performance of *Kafka Fragments*, as they navigate the constraints of Western classical vocal practices while seeking to push the boundaries of expression through movement and sound. By doing so, one not only honours the rich history of bel canto techniques but also redefines their application in contemporary contexts.

It is instructive to turn toward Meyerhold's biomechanics, the early Soviet actor-training system that replaces psychological introspection with a rigorously physical dramaturgy organised in cyclical units of *intention – execution – reaction*, a logic of action that both disciplines and enlarges the performer's expressive range. Developed within a constructivist theatre that privileges the stage as a platform for

motion, Meyerhold's practice treats movement, rhythm, balance, and spatial composition as the primary materials of performance, what he called the "music of plastic movement,"³⁹ and invites directors to compose a movement score whose clarity can carry meaning without mimetic naturalism. Its contemporary transmission, through systematic etudes and pedagogy by heirs such as Gennadi Bogdanov, and through long-term documentation projects (e.g., ITI Germany's biomechanics archive) demonstrates the method's adaptability to modern staging and its capacity to articulate thought through precise physical tasks. This bodily grammar speaks directly to the fragmentary dramaturgy of Kurtág's *Kafka-Fragmente*, whose notational freedom and episodic forms solicit a performer's agility in instantaneous reorientation; from aphoristic intensities to extended scenes such as *Szene in der Elektrischen*. In practical terms, integrating *Kafka Fragments* with biomechanics means treating each fragment as an etude: structuring the singer and violinist dyad through the biomechanical cycle (otkaz–posil–tochka), calibrating microtransitions of weight, gaze, and breath to the text's shifts, and employing object work and spatial counterpoint to exteriorise Kafka's inner itineraries, thus allowing the work's "genderless" vocal authority to be embodied in neutral, repeatable physical scores that sharpen its expressive precision without constraining its existential openness.

Kafka Fragments in Performance

Kafka Fragments is roughly an hour long, made up of 40 fragments of music but only 38 texts, with the lyrics of numbers 5 and 9 of part III repeating those of numbers 11 and 3 in part I. The sources of these texts are taken from Tagebücher (12), the third and fourth Octavhefte (12), additional fragments printed in the same volume as the Octavhefte (11), and Kafka's letters to Pollock (1), Bauer (1), and Jesenká (1). The only part of *Kafka Fragments* which is not a microcosm of music is the whole of part II, which is one movement and the longest fragment (at around 7 minutes); it is a departure from the dense writing to a more sparse, lyric segment, with the majority of time focused on the violin part.

Juliane Banse and András Keller's ECM realisation of this work – recorded in the Historischer Reitstadel, Neumarkt – has often functioned as a de facto reference, partly because Kurtág was present at the sessions. The duo's aesthetic is one of ascetic precision: Banse's rapid oscillation between sotto voce emission, sprechgesang-like attack, and acerbic declamation allows textual grain to cut through without sacrificing pitch focus; Keller's violin articulates the cycle's extremities (fragility and violence) by calibrating contact point and bow pressure so that gesture is felt as well as thought. The recording's dynamic topology (from near inaudible whispers to piercing shrieks) concretises Kurtág's economy without mannerism; it is 'theatrical' only insofar as every sonic microact is weighted as an event. The

³⁹ Meyerhold, V. (1969) *Meyerhold on Theatre*. Edited and translated by E. Braun. London: Methuen, p. 196

ECM documentation explicitly frames the work's 'fantastic economy', a remark attributed to Ligeti, aligning this interpretation with the Weberian ethic of maximal expressivity at minimal material expenditure.⁴⁰ Reviews from the period similarly emphasise how the performers render each fragment as a discrete cognitive scene, reinforcing the cycle's mosaic dramaturgy.⁴¹

Anna Prohaska and Isabelle Faust articulate a lyric and warm alternative. The soprano's crystalline timbre and the violin's rounded sonority soften some of the cycle's astringency, producing a spectrum that occasionally brushes Romantic resonance, most palpably in 'Träumend hing die Blume' and the long arch of 'Der wahre Weg'. Critics have noted episodes of Sprechstimme turbulence reminiscent of *Pierrot lunaire*, yet the prevailing impression is of temporal elasticity and cantabile, a choice that reframes existential unease as lingering contemplation rather than paroxysm.⁴² Whereas Banse and Keller tend to hard-edge contrasts at the fragment junctions, Prohaska and Faust cultivate connective tissue – breath-borne continuity across discontinuities – without denying rupture. Their cycle duration suggests a pacing competitive with ECM's but is marked by a slightly more luxuriant sustain in extended movements.⁴³

Susan Narucki and Curtis Macomber present a psychologically urgent reading that brings Kafka's absurdist edge to the fore. Narucki's timbral palette pushes toward the limits of emission (grain, breath, nearnoise) while maintaining textual intelligibility; Macomber's articulation favours incisive attacks and raw textures. The resulting dramaturgy accelerates transitions and heightens local contrasts, treating the aphorisms as miniature explosions rather than ascetic meditations. The short cycle length implies materially brisker traversal; less resonance is allowed to accrue between fragments – an approach consonant with Narucki's long-standing advocacy for contemporary vocal idioms.⁴⁴ Program notes from Narucki's earlier concert realisations corroborate a performance philosophy keyed to Kurtág's notational loosening (a pulse unmoored from the bar line), aiming for immediacy of speech rhythm and gestural spontaneity.⁴⁵

The 'punishing' technical demands on the soprano voice in *Kafka Fragments* can be illustrated in the required range of the piece; a bottom F natural below middle C, which appears only once in part III

⁴⁰ ECM Records. *György Kurtág: Kafka-Fragmente* – J. Banse (soprano), A. Keller (violin), ECM 1965 (2006), liner notes and album page.

⁴¹ MusicWeb International. (2006) *Review of ECM 1965*.

⁴² Ionarts (C. T. Downey). *Review of Prohaska/Faust* (Harmonia Mundi, 2022).

⁴³ Presto Music. ECM 1965 product page (tracklist and timings).

⁴⁴ Presto Music. Avie AV2760 – S. Narucki & C. Macomber (2025).

⁴⁵ UC San Diego (Program Notes). Narucki/Macomber concert (May 2, 2022), contextual remarks on notation and performance.

number 4, ‘Schmutzig bin ich, Milena... [I am dirty, Milena...]’. The highest note also appears only once, notated as a top C double sharp in part I number 9, ‘Die Weissnäherinnen [The Seamstress]’. The latter is fleeting as the climax of a sequence of ascending demi-semi-quavers, but the former is a more substantial dotted crotchet. These are the highest and lowest extremes expected of the voice. Richard Miller illustrates that the lowest note of the chest register of a soprano is a G below middle C, and the highest is an A above a high F in the flageolet register.⁴⁶ While classes of soprano could be identified in different areas of this pitch, we can acknowledge that Kurtág’s composition for almost all of this register is of the extreme.

While we have established that *Kafka Fragments* is vocally challenging due to its extremities of range, intensity of duration, and requirement for both dexterity and lyric line, its demands remain within a prescriptive melodic and tonal framework typical of Western classical music, which separates it from the non-prescribed creative responses. There are only moments where any sort of explicitly extended vocal technique distinct from pure vocal tones occurs, such as sprechgesang in number 12, ‘Mein ohrmuschel...’. Other isolated occasions include the notepad replaced by an arrow with the instruction ‘der höchstmögliche Ton [the highest tone possible]’ in the explosive movement number 19, ‘Nichts dergleichen [Nothing of the Kind]’. There are a few other uncommon markings in the glossary of terms in the back of the score, but most of these refer to dynamic markings and Kurtág’s own specific notation for varying degrees of rests rather than anything which may alter the vocal production itself.

If *Kafka Fragments* is considered to be inherently dramatic and ‘ripe for staging’,⁴⁷ I am interested in applying bel canto technique practices to this wide-ranging score, but first need to understand how this differs from applying the same practices of repertoire from, say, the 18th century. Looking at the demands in range and vocal quality in *Kafka Fragments*, the song cycle requires a much wider vocal range from the soprano than that of traditional bel canto opera styles of the 18th century and modern teachings thereof. However, I am interested in applying the technique firstly because it implies ‘good’ and ‘healthy’ singing on the body, but also to illustrate the unnecessary fashion of gestural vocal choices and jagged vocal production. Barbara Gentili argues that achieving a perfectly smooth vocal line that joins the pitches without any perceptible change in the timbre of the voice is considered to be a basic skill of the Western classically trained singer.⁴⁸ Thus, understanding how to translate this

⁴⁶ Miller, R. *Training soprano voices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 25c.

⁴⁷ Eichler, J. (2005) ‘Fragments of Kafka in song’, *New York Times*.

⁴⁸ Gentili, B. (2021) ‘The changing aesthetics of vocal registration in the age of “verismo”’, *Music and Letters*, 102(1), pp. 54–79.

aesthetic goal into the technical mechanism of my voice will require focus on the breathwork and ‘breathing topography’ of the piece as well as smooth laryngeal movement across large registral jumps.

One of the primary reasons why the bel canto technique is indispensable for performing *Kafka Fragments* is the need for vocal control and flexibility. Kurtág’s composition is marked by sudden shifts in dynamics, tessitura, and articulation. The fragmented nature of Kafka’s texts, coupled with Kurtág’s sparse and disjointed musical lines, demands a singer who can adapt quickly to these abrupt changes. A bel canto-trained singer, with their emphasis on breath control and support, is well equipped to handle these demands, ensuring that each phrase is delivered with clarity and precision. The ability to maintain a lyrical line while expressing intense emotion is a hallmark of bel canto technique, making it particularly suited for the interpretative challenges of *Kafka Fragments*. Additionally, the bel canto technique provides the stamina needed for the demanding nature of the piece. The song cycle’s fragmented structure means that there are few opportunities for the singer to rest, requiring sustained vocal endurance. Bel canto training, emphasising efficient vocal production and proper breath management, helps singers maintain vocal health and stamina throughout the performance.

The importance of bel canto technique in performing *Kafka Fragments* is further underscored by the need for clear diction and articulation. Kurtág’s meticulous attention to text setting means that every word and syllable must be delivered with precision. Bel canto training, with its emphasis on clear enunciation and vowel purity, ensures that the text is communicated effectively to the audience. This is particularly important in *Kafka Fragments*, where the fragmented nature of the text requires the singer to convey meaning through careful attention to linguistic details.

Practical Application of Bel Canto Singing to *Kafka Fragments*

The next step in my exploration of *Kafka Fragments* is to employ my own practice methods, using bel canto techniques throughout the piece as a whole. To facilitate this process, I maintained detailed practice diaries that document my vocal exercises, movement explorations, and reflections on the requirements within the detailed contents of each fragment. This analytical method allows me to highlight the difficulties of navigating extreme abstract modernist vocal writing and demonstrate the nuanced approach required to achieve accuracy within the complexity of Kurtág’s composition.

As we have seen from Miller’s examples earlier in this chapter, warming up the voice is essential to properly preparing the voice to function efficiently. Singing repertoire to which my body is accustomed before practising *Kafka Fragments* is almost like preparing my voice for the task ahead; everything

needs to be in the proper ‘bel canto’ space. This foundational warm-up allows me to engage resonances and essential tonal qualities, reinforcing the techniques that support a rich and vibrant sound. The first few numbers of *Kafka Fragments* are fairly situated in the middle of the voice and not extremely technically demanding compared to some of the later movements, and it may seem irrelevant to warm up the voice fully for a piece that initially appears less challenging. However, I have found that practice is much more effective and singing becomes easier if I approach all the pieces in *Kafka Fragments* with an established bel canto vocal position. By treating the early sections of *Kafka Fragments* with the same seriousness and attention to detail as I would for a Verdi aria, I can maintain a sense of continuity in my vocal technique. This approach not only ensures that I am fully prepared for the more demanding sections that follow but also helps me to explore the emotional depth and nuances of the music. Integrating this mindset into my practice routine allows me to navigate the complexities of *Kafka Fragments* with greater ease and confidence.

In order to physically prepare myself to sing with full body connection and legato, I prefer to warm up for a longer amount of time using full songs. Recently, I have favoured Strauss’s ‘Frühling’ from *Vier Letzte Lieder* and Verdi’s ‘Sempre Libera’ from *La Traviata*, the former to engage my breathing support over long sustained phrases, and the latter to comfortably access the higher end of my register with the aid of muscle memory. Some movements from *Kafka Fragments* are fundamentally operatic in nature, requiring the singer to perform long legato lines over a large portion of the register; this spans over a two octave range from a bottom B flat below the stave to a top B sharp above the stave.

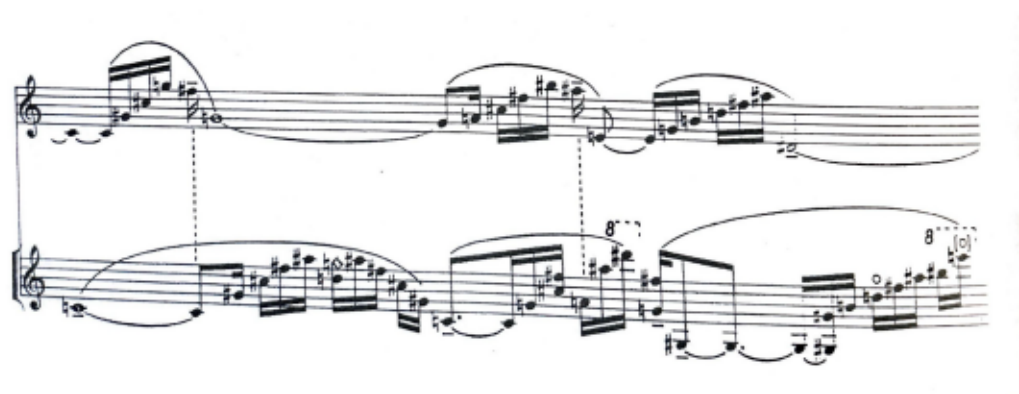


Figure 1. ‘Nimmermehr’, *Kafka Fragments*, page 7.

This passage of music presents numerous challenges that require advanced operatic vocal technique to execute successfully. The rapid scalar runs and embellishments characteristic of coloratura singing demand exceptional agility and flexibility, necessitating clarity and precision in the articulation of each note. Breath management is paramount, as the long, sustained phrases require effective use of the appoggio technique to maintain consistent subglottic pressure and manage inhalation and exhalation.

tion efficiently. Despite the fast moving notes, a smooth legato line must be preserved, involving seamless transitions and well coordinated breath support and laryngeal function. Pitch accuracy in Kurtág's music is critical, and the range and tessitura of the passage further determine the vocal demands, with high notes necessitating a well developed head voice and possibly mixed voice techniques to avoid strain. Proper support through the diaphragm and intercostal muscles is crucial to sustain the vocal line and handle the piece's demands without fatigue. Moreover, smooth transitions between different vocal registers (chest, middle, head) are essential to avoid noticeable breaks or changes in timbre. Another example of this necessary combination of legato line, support, and acute precision is movement number 9 in part I, 'Die Weissnäherinnen':

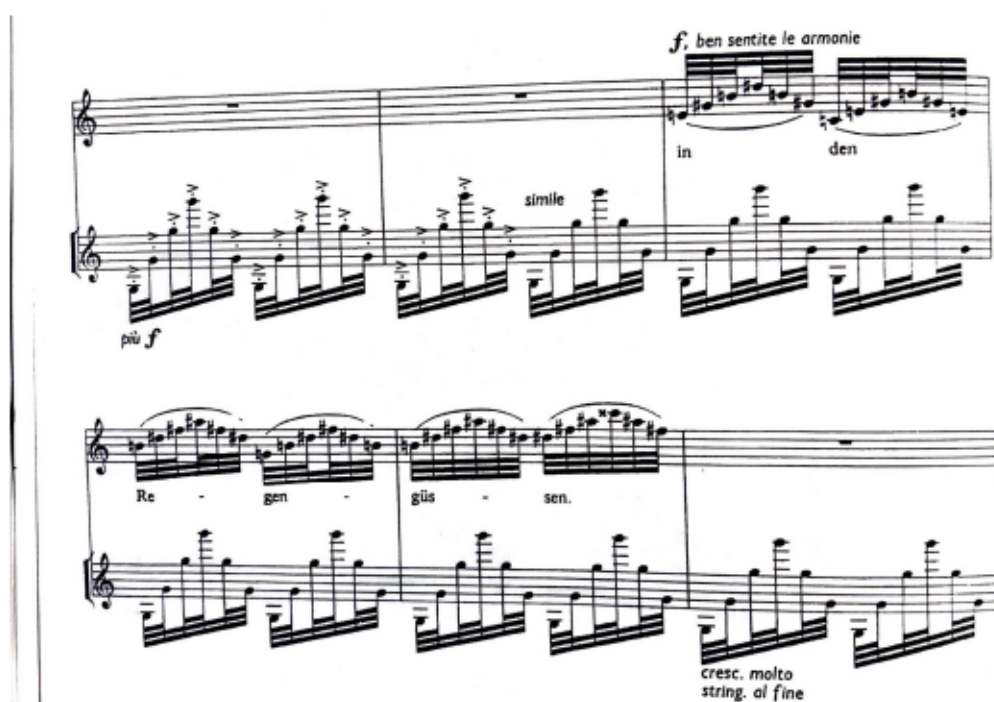


Figure 2. 'Die Weissnäherinnen', *Kafka Fragments* page 10.

It could be tempting to approximate the pitches and attempt an overall shape of the music for effect, but this brings us back to the restrictions and power dynamics of the affordances discussed above. In other words, to stay true to the composer's intention of fixed pitch materials, I must find a technical approach that is accurate rather than performative, and focus on an accurate recreation of pitched content rather than gestural illusion through virtuosic effect. The elements of bel canto technique which become more prevalent in instances of non-standard vocal production are almost exclusive to simply supporting the breath when ordered to sing the 'highest tone possible':

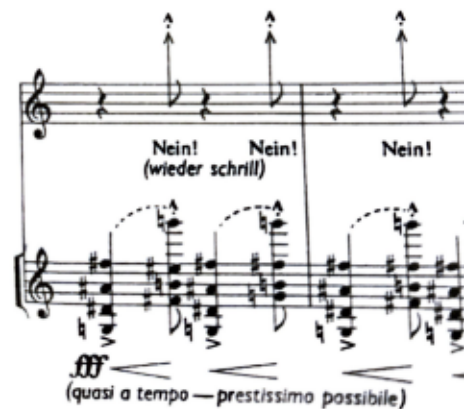


Figure 3. ‘Nichts dergleichen’, *Kafka Fragments* page 23.

The singer cannot be expected to create a beautiful legato tone, and in accordance with the anguished and triple fortissimo violin line, the tone will inevitably be loud. In order to protect the vocal cords from straining on such a high pitch at such a high volume, the voice must rely upon strong support from the singer’s diaphragm and intercostal muscles.

Bel Canto Technique within Meyerhold’s Framework

I will now summarise for each movement how bel canto technique affects the vocal production of the song cycle. I have prepared this examination in a purposefully structured way of aligning specific principles of biomechanics to bel canto in a rigid way so to as reflect the aesthetic of its physical presentation. Similar themes of applying bel canto technique to each fragment may recur throughout this analysis; however, it is important to analyse each one individually within the context of the piece as a whole, retaining the intricacies of each of their unique details. Integrating Meyerhold’s biomechanics with the bel canto approach to singing Kurtág’s *Kafka Fragments* provides a rich framework for understanding how vocal production and physical movement can enhance the performance by seeking similarities in vocal production with the affordances physicalised in Meyerhold’s etudes. Each movement within the fragments embodies principles such as precision, balance, coordination, rhythm, expressiveness, and the interplay of playfulness and discipline, all of which are essential components of the biomechanics style.

Precision and Rhythm

While the concept of precision is applicable to every fragment, there are some which are more technically complex and demand exactness of both practice and skill to perfect. The bel canto technique emphasises vocal precision, requiring the singer to articulate text and musical notes with clarity and

intention. This precision aligns with Meyerhold's principle of movement, as it necessitates a careful coordination of breath control and vocal technique. The singer must find a physical balance that allows for optimal breath support while maintaining a centred and resonant sound, which is crucial not only for vocal production but also for the physical posture required to convey the emotional depth of the texts. Each fragment has its own rhythmic structure, which not only dictates the pacing of the vocal lines but also influences the emotional delivery, requiring the singer to be attuned to the underlying pulse and dynamics of the music and the corresponding physical movements.

I.1. 'Die Guten gehn im gleichen Schritt [The Good March in Step]'⁴⁹

The first line of this movement is a long legato line on an A4 marked 'ben tenuto', allowing the singer to centre their voice in the middle of the register and to emphasise the importance of the articulation of the text straightaway. The following phrase is broken up into short staccato rhymes dotted over the register from an A3 to an Ab5; because of the precision required and the dynamic range (marked 'pianissimo'), it is tempting to sing this phrase off the voice, but the legato line can still be maintained if the singing is supported through the rests and resonates properly. The challenge lies in maintaining a legato line while exciting percussive text, especially with the markings 'quasi non vibrato' and 'floating'; these techniques require the diaphragm and intercostal muscles to be engaged to support the sound and minimise breath oscillation without any tension around the larynx. Similar techniques with the shorter rhythms might be used in operatic recitative, combined with the longer-held notes, almost like pauses in the line.

I.7. 'Wenn er mich immer Frägt [But He Just Won't Stop Asking Me]'⁵⁰

The opening phrase contains the instruction 'Kicsit nyafogva [A Bit Squeaking]', an extended vocal technique which requires a slight tightening of the vocal cords, alongside more vocal pressure to achieve the desired squeaky tone. This is a useful tool for expression, but it is the first instance where the singer cannot intentionally produce sound using the bel canto technique. As the range is in the lower-middle area, this is fairly easily achievable, with minimal stress on the vocal cords.

The phrase 'auf der Weise' jumps within three notes across a large proportion of the soprano range: from a G5 to an A3. The execution of this is aided by the staccato markings which imply

⁴⁹ [The good march in step. Unaware of them, the others dance around them the dances of time.]

⁵⁰ [But he just won't stop asking me. That 'ah', detached from the sentence, flew away like a ball across the meadow.]

a lightness of voice; alongside keeping as much balance of the head voice in the lowest note as possible, the A3 should be easily achievable if not too much chest is used.

I.8. 'Es Zupfte Mich Jemand Am Kleid [Someone Tugged at My Clothes]'⁵¹

'Molto concitato' indicates that the piece should be played very agitatedly. As it is also marked 'pianissimo', maintaining a consistent, controlled, soft dynamic while ensuring clarity and precision can be difficult to achieve while avoiding tension in the vocal cords. The closed vowel 'ü' on a semi-quaver F#4 at forte makes the final phrase challenging to sing in strict semi-quavers.

I.9. 'Die Weissnäherinnen [The Seamstress]'⁵²

This movement is marked 'etwas verrückt [a little crazy]'. In an effort to achieve this, the singer may be tempted to approximate the pitches and attempt an overall shape of the music for effect; this highlights the restriction/power complex being afforded to the singer, especially as that line is marked 'ben senate le armonie [feel the harmonies well]'. This short burst of coloratura is inherently operatic, as it echoes the shapes and colours of similar fast passages from the bel canto canon. This section requires strong breath control to carry through the phrase, as there is no time to breathe in between the demi-semi-quavers.

IV.7. 'Wiederum, Wiederum [Again, Again]'⁵³

In this movement, the soprano must be prepared to jump in haste between registers, maintaining a low larynx and connection to the body in order to create an even and legato sound. The gusts of wind in the short crescendos and decrescendos must be controlled with proper breath support.

I.16. 'Keine Rückkehr [No Going Back]'⁵⁴

At the opening of the piece, the singer should begin with a controlled and sustained breath, preparing for the delicate ascent to a high Bb on the word 'Keine'. This note requires a focused vocal placement to achieve clarity and projection while maintaining a sense of fragility. Attention to articulation and diction becomes crucial. For example, in the section where the phrase 'Mein Herz, das ist ein Fehler' is repeated, the singer must enunciate the consonants precisely, particularly on the phrase's repeated 's' and 'r' sounds. This ensures that the text's meaning is conveyed effectively while maintaining the legato line. The sudden 'piano' marking on the word

⁵¹ [Someone tugged at my clothes, but I shrugged him off.]

⁵² [The seamstresses in the downpourings.]

⁵³ [Again, again, exiled far away, exiled far away. Mountains, desert, a vast country to be wandered through.]

⁵⁴ [From a certain point on, there is no going back. That is the point to reach.]

‘Stirbt’ demands a controlled and delicate approach, allowing the voice to gently taper off while maintaining a sense of intensity. Conversely, the subsequent ‘forte’ marking on ‘vernimmt’ calls for a powerful and resonant tone, highlighting the contrast in emotions within the text. The descending chromatic line on ‘Zwischenstufe’ should be executed with precision and fluidity, ensuring a seamless transition between the notes. This attention to legato contributes to the overall expressive phrasing and narrative of the composition.

I.19. ‘Nichts dergleichen [Nothing of the Kind]’⁵⁵

This movement presents itself as the soprano’s mad scene, conveying a sense of urgency, intensity, and emotional turmoil embodied in extremes in both pitch and dynamics. The repetition of the word ‘nein’ over a wide range of pitch is aided by the brightness of the vowel in the word, meaning that minimal vowel modification is needed to produce the word in different registers, compounding the impact of this word. The words ‘nichts dergleichen [nothing of the kind]’ are initially written with descending appoggiaturas. The vocal line is fast-paced and fragmented, requiring a precise and agile execution. Thus, a sharp and assertive tone should be used to sing the words ‘nichts dergleichen [nothing of the kind]’, reflecting the singer’s determination and frustration.

III.4. ‘Schmutzig bin ich, Milena... [I am Dirty, Milena...]’⁵⁶

The first page of this movement benefits from a strong legato line, as Kurtág marks slurs over certain notes, but the character of being ‘endlessly dirty’ is enhanced by the gluey movement between each note, as occurs in extreme legato singing. This is another example of extreme vocal range for soprano, with the lowest tone, F3, occurring three times, positioned before and after a high-middle-range F#5. The challenge is singing such a low note pianissimo as marked, which I have found easier to control if I stay with the balance of more head voice than chest projection; this also softens the tone when the more interesting drama of the violin tuning begins in the last bar. The drama is reflected in the soprano line with the longest of Kurtág’s own pauses (see Chapter Two).

III.5. ‘Elendes Leben (double) [Miserable Life (Double)]’⁵⁷

This movement is paired with I.11, ‘Sonntag, Den 19. Juli 1910 (Berceuse II)’. The development of the style from the first movement includes the lack of extreme dynamics between the ‘sleep’

⁵⁵ [Nothing of the kind, nothing of the kind.]

⁵⁶ [I am dirty, Milena, endlessly dirty; that is why I make such a fuss about cleanliness. None sing as purely as those in deepest Hell; it is their singing that we take for the singing of angels.]

⁵⁷ [Slept, woke, slept, woke, miserable life.]

and ‘awake’. As the vocal cords are tighter and stretched for the A5 in the final bar, I found it essential to support the breath into the chest register for the G3.

III.7. ‘Ziel, weg, zögern [Destination, Path, Hesitation]’⁵⁸

Articulation and clear diction are vital in this performance; for instance, the consonants in ‘Ziel’ and ‘Weg’ must be distinctly enunciated while maintaining the legato line. This balance is essential to ensure the text’s clarity without sacrificing musicality. Additionally, the rhythmic nuances in Kurtág’s writing, particularly the use of silence and the breath between phrases, must be respected. These elements carry emotional weight, and it is quite rare for the shorter numbers of *Kafka Fragments* to have so many rests.

III.9. ‘Verstecke [Hiding Places]’⁵⁹

Paired with movement I.3, this piece’s melody is pressed out into a laboured dream-like quality, aided by Kurtág’s unique pause markings on certain notes. The movement gradually crescendos, and therefore the singer must engage the vocal folds more firmly, involving a slightly elevated laryngeal position to support the necessary power without sacrificing tone quality. For instance, during the more forceful delivery of phrases containing high notes such as F5, the singer should maintain a balanced approach, ensuring that tension is minimised to preserve a beautiful sound. Maintaining a legato line with this sort of unconventional articulation requires some negotiation so that the breath flow does not become restricted. The end of the soprano’s vocal line in this movement finishes with a long Kurtág rest, which should be given proper dramatic value, with the breath and tension held until the end of the violin’s playing.

III.12. ‘Scene on a Tram’⁶⁰

This movement is one of the longest of Kurtág’s *Kafka Fragments*, and one of the most rhythmically and vocally complex: a small scene at the end of this part. The rhythms are similar to those of the opening of the whole cycle in I.1. The violin composition is stark, and fragmented vocal lines require a nuanced approach to breath control and support. For example, as the singer approaches rising intervals, such as a leap from G4 to B4, the focus should be on achieving a

⁵⁸ [There is a destination, but no path to it; what we call a path is hesitation.]

⁵⁹ [There are countless hiding places, but only one salvation; but then again, there are as many paths to salvation as there are hiding places.]

⁶⁰ [The dancer Eduardowa, a music lover, travels everywhere, even on the tram, in the company of two violinists whom she frequently calls upon to play. For there is no ban on playing on the tram, provided the playing is good, it is pleasing to the other passengers, and it is free of charge, that is to say, the hat is not passed round afterwards. However, it is initially somewhat surprising and for a little while everyone considers it unseemly. But at full-speed, with a powerful current of air, and in a quiet street, it sounds nice.]

seamless connection between these pitches using a legato line; this is aided by Kurtág's use of portamenti between some of the pitches. Utilising proper breath management will not only facilitate a smooth legato but also allow for a more connected and expressive interpretation. Kurtág uses a mordent on the second page on the long melisma of the word 'Musik', which is not idiosyncratic of the bel canto style, but should still be sung within a legato line. This movement as a whole spans the range of G3 to Fx4, and articulation of the text is another crucial aspect when the coloratura is heavily chromatic; this can be clarified by appropriate vowel modification, for example, again on the word 'Musik'. There is a rare moment within *Kafka Fragments* where the singer is left alone by the violin accompaniment for an a capella cadenza; attention to tuning is essential here, especially when the melodic line reaches the lower tones of a G3 shortly before leaping up to an E4.

IV. 2. 'Eine Lange Geschichte [A Long Story]'⁶¹

Very unusually for the soprano voice, the first three lines of this fragment are written in the alto clef. While this is not a strictly extended technique, it is an extension of the traditional expectations of a soprano role. The initial rhythms are complex, especially navigating quick chromatic passages in an unfamiliar chest register. I have found that keeping a lower larynx helps me to produce the higher notes required at the end of the fragment.

Balance and Coordination

The balance in vocal production is essential, particularly in managing breath support and resonance. Each movement may challenge the singer to find equilibrium between their physical posture and vocal placement, allowing for a steady and controlled sound that remains centred throughout. Coordination between breath control and vocal technique is vital in *Kafka Fragments*. As the singer navigates the complex musical lines and varied vocal techniques, they must coordinate their movements and vocalisations to maintain fluidity and expressiveness, ensuring that the emotional intent is clearly communicated.

I.5. 'Berceuse I [Lullaby I]'⁶²

In my practice diary (21/9/22), I wrote:

The text for this movement is simple, so today I want to try tuning into myself when I am resonating on pianissimo notes and not using much vibrato. I want to understand better

⁶¹ [I look a girl in the eye and it was a very long love story with thunder and kisses and lightning. I live fast.]

⁶² [Wrap your overcoat, o lofty dream, around the child.]

how my voice functions when there is less vibrato being used. It's not so much the case of 'singing less' but sitting with the resonance rather than spinning the sound with more air. The aim is pure and *pianissimo*. The instructions don't say 'senza vibrato', but this is the effect I am aiming for.

The pitches sound shallower but also pingy when I try to sing them without oscillating the pitch. Physiologically, I imagine aiming the sound at my nasal cavities, and then it feels as if I'm hovering there. The bottom A flat feels like it's in the same space of my mask as the D natural; I just have to use a bit more breath and lean into it. The bright vowel of 'deinen' helps.

I wonder if there is a lullaby in opera which sounds like this? I'm struggling to imagine how to make this sound more 'bel canto'. My concern is that there is some tension when my voice isn't oscillating in the way it needs to, to be very loud, but singing into the resonance feels comfortable.

Decided to sing the final middle C on the previous 'ih' vowel of 'Kind'.

This movement presents itself as a short aria, marked 'very worn' at the beginning. There are four lyrical phrases in which the subtle and nuanced dynamic changes can be explored while maintaining a sense of control and balance. There is a small semi-tone portamento up to the first note, which could be the extent to which Kurtág expected full sliding between the notes in his music, which one would expect to hear much more of in the bel canto singing of opera. Each phrase has very specific dynamic markings; the first phrase is marked with a pair of classical 'mezzo di voce' hairpins in the first two phrases. The marking 'a little warm' implies that the head voice resonance should be integrated briefly with a mix of chest voice resonance to add a different colour to the sound. The intricacies of this movement are delicate and nuanced, therefore requiring consistent support to give the singer sufficient flexibility. (See appendix page 89 for rehearsal drawings).

I.17. 'Stolz [Pride]'⁶³

While the singer should focus on producing a warm and rich tone in the chest voice in unison with the violin, a mix with head voice is essential to prepare for the notes higher in the register later on in the piece. This movement is marked as 'forte' throughout, so it is important not to push the sound when the vocal folds are thicker in this lower register. As the melody ascends to

⁶³ [(15th of November 1910, 10 o'clock) I will not let myself be made tired. I will dive into my story even if that should lacerate my face.]

the higher range, such as C#4 and E4, the performer should gradually transition into the head voice, maintaining a smooth and seamless connection between the registers. The opening instructions tell the singer to perform this piece in a ‘Kindisch trotzig [childishly defiant]’ manner, implying a characterised tone throughout, perhaps slightly affected by a transitional legato line. There are a number, and on some occasions a combination, of accent markings, requiring strong bodily support in their production. (My practice diary mentions the need for extra breath for the C sharp.)

I.18. ‘Träument hing die blume [The Flower Hung Dreamily]’⁶⁴

The dynamic marking ‘pianissimo’ is in dramatic contrast with the previous movement, with only five bars to prepare the voice. The larynx needs to be lowered in order to avoid tension for sustained quiet singing in the higher end of the register. A legato line is easily achieved due to long phrases marked with slurs, and an extended crescendo and decrescendo marked over the second and third lines allows the singer to employ messa di voce. In the final phrase, the diminuendo on a G5 falling briefly to an F#5 requires the singer to support the sound well in a forward position for the optimum control of resonance and decreasing dynamic, which is aided by the pure ‘o’ vowel in the word ‘umzogsie’.

I.10. ‘Szene am Bahnhof [Scene at the Train Station]’⁶⁵

The first phrase of this movement is fairly angular but non-accented, which can be a challenge when attempting to sing a legato line. The music lies over a comfortable range for the soprano register and is rhythmically led by the text, which implies an emphasis on the diction and setting of the ‘szene’.

III.1. ‘Haben? Sein? [To Have? To Be?]’⁶⁶

This movement tests the singer over a wide range of the register, from a B5 to a G3, in one bar alone. As this is a disjoint and angular passage, it is vital to maintain vocal agility by keeping a low larynx so as not to compromise the legato line. It is likely necessary to elongate the ‘i’ vowel in ‘Erstrikken’ on the B5 to maintain a beautiful tone in the high register. The vocal part is marked ‘piano’ and ‘poco a poco crescendo’, so adequate breath support is required to fully exercise dynamic control over wide intervallic leaps. In my practice diary (30/8/21), I outlined my approach to embodying and internalising that control:

⁶⁴ [The flower hung dreamily on its tall stem. Dusk enveloped it.]

⁶⁵ [The onlookers freeze as the train goes past.]

⁶⁶ [There is no ‘to have’, only a ‘to be’, a ‘to be’ longing for the last breath, for suffocation.]

I began speaking the text and translation freely, then in rhythm. I found it useful to mark out the beats of the bars first, as they vary due to there being no time signature (begins in 12/8).

Haben? Sein? [To have? To be?]

Es gibt kein Haben, nur ein Sein [There is no 'to have', only 'to be']

nur ein nach letztem Atem [a 'to be' longing for the last breath]

nach Ersticken verlangendes sein [to ask for suffocation]

It seems sensible to learn the soprano part as an independent line from the violin, to cement the exact pitches in my muscle memory – rhythm is probably a more helpful reference point to line up to when eventually practising with the violinist.

Practising with a long legato line proves useful before adding any kind of 'style' or following written instructions (*poco stantato* [a little stunted]).

'Frei mit Schwung' – much more easily achievable from a strict starting point.

My instinct is to subdivide swung rhythms as a solution to having no conductor – I need to get used to having command of these rhythms.

Bar 9 – negotiating top B natural to bottom G natural. B natural comfortable, but I need to remember to keep the rest of the vocal line in the same position so as not to chest the G too much, with enough height in the voice so it will resonate, and so the following A natural isn't sabotaged. I need to work on accentuating it in a 'stunted' way without resorting to chesting too much. I think a G natural is the lowest comfortable note in my register.

B natural vowel '[i]'. Not particularly resonant and requires more support. Don't let tongue fall back.

'*Sein*' on middle A natural. Easy to get stuck – possibly one to 'straighten out' to reflect the 'suffocation' in the text. To be built in, and might benefit from tuning the note against the violin line.

(Thought: consider straight tone vs. *bel canto* – how can it be used healthily as a tool to serve the dramatic intention of the text. Look for examples in opera.)

Tuning of the tri-tones, fourths, and fifths. Make these very clear.

Open 5th (A natural–E natural) could be a reflection of the open strings on the violin (bars 6–7).

III.3. 'Miene Festung [My Fortress]'⁶⁷

As the vocal notes are long and held tones, I have found it beneficial to purify the tone with as little vibrato as possible by leaning into the head voice with each pitch. The tuning of this passage is achieved easily this way, especially if the style is copied by the violinist. This shape of tone also helps to shape the image of the bars of a fortress between the singer and the instrumentalist.

III.6. 'Der Begrenzte Kreis [The Closed Circle]'⁶⁸

For a soprano voice, beginning to sing at a G#3 can be particularly challenging due to the vocal folds vibrating at a large mass and length, making it more difficult to achieve a rich, resonant sound. I had to carefully practise using my breath to produce a G#3 effectively as a starting note, and also a fleeting quaver. The held note on the word 'rein' is an opportunity to play with the resonance of the nasal cavity to create a beautiful, pure tone.

III.8. 'So fest [As Tightly]'⁶⁹

This movement is marked both 'forte' and 'sostenuto'. In order to achieve a beautiful tone within these parameters, proper support and control of the breath must be maintained. This is particularly essential for the last bar of the second line on the word 'verwerfen', in which the tones G5 and F3 must be navigated effectively. Enough breath must be kept in reserve for the F3 to resonate properly at the end of the phrase. The larynx should be lowered slightly to facilitate a more open throat, which promotes a fuller sound. This lowering of the larynx helps create a sense of space in the vocal tract, allowing for enhanced resonance and projection.

III.10. 'Penetrant Jüdische [Offensively Jewish] (a⁷⁰)'⁷¹

There are no articulation markings for the singer here, but I opted to try and match the violin part which has relentless accents on most crotchet beats throughout. This is a style repeated by Kurtág, and balancing the accents while maintaining a legato breath flow requires concentrated support and a lowered larynx. As the range of this movement is in the middle to low range for the soprano voice, I opt to use a chest voice here and take a heavier mix up to the E4 on 'der'.

⁶⁷ [My prison cell – my fortress.]

⁶⁸ [The closed circle is pure.]

⁶⁹ [As tightly as the hand holds the stone. It holds it so tight only to cast it as far off as it can. Yet even that distance the path will reach.]

⁷⁰ [The manuscript offers versions a and b which 'can be chosen at discretion'.]

⁷¹ [In the struggle between yourself and the world, side with the world.]

IV.3. 'In memoriam Robert Klein [In Memory of Robert Klein]'⁷²

Marked 'vivace', this movement feels like a fanfare of the soprano voice. As we have moved back into the familiar trend of fleeting fragments which only last a handful of seconds, the singer must make sure to prepare the opening Bb4 with the end note C5 in mind; this can be achieved by keeping the larynx low but the vowels bright. The rhythm is jagged, jumping between the pitches, so it is essential to keep the vocal support firm. Some vowel modification is needed for the resonant production of the two C5s on 'Wälder jagt'.

IV. 4. 'Aus einem alten Notizbuch [From an Old Notebook]'⁷³

On the second syllable of the word 'rechte', Kurtág deploys a harmonic marking at the end of a decrescendo. Increased head voice and strong support will allow the voice to resonate in the mask without vibrato.

IV. 5. 'Leoparden [Leopards]'⁷⁴

The soprano has around 20 seconds' rest at the beginning of the movement, which can be used to regulate breathing and lower the larynx if it has become raised. Due to the vocal line jumping quickly between registers, it is easiest to try and approach each phrase with adequate head voice in order to maintain the column of sound and not cut off the higher register. On the last word, 'Zeremonie', the syllable 'nie' covers the range of G#5 to G3, which requires brightening at the top end of the register and carrying the brightness down to the chest register in order for the vowel to sound evenly across all three octaves.

Expressiveness

The ability to convey emotion is paramount in *Kafka Fragments*. The bel canto technique enhances expressiveness by allowing the singer to manipulate dynamics, tone, and phrasing, thus bringing the text to life and capturing the essence of Kafka's themes.

I.6. 'Nimmermehr (Excommunicato) [Nevermore (Excommunicated)]'⁷⁵

This movement presents numerous challenges that require advanced operatic vocal technique to execute successfully. The rapid scale runs and embellishments characteristic of coloratura

⁷² [Though the hounds are still in the courtyard, the game will not escape, no matter how they race through the woods.]

⁷³ [Now, in the evening, having studied since six in the morning, I notice that my left hand has for some time been gripping the fingers of my right in commiseration.]

⁷⁴ [Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial jugs dry; this is repeated, again and again, until it is possible to calculate in advance when they will come, and it becomes part of the ceremony.]

⁷⁵ [Nevermore, nevermore will you return to the cities, nevermore will the great bell resound above you.]

singing demand exceptional agility and flexibility, necessitating clarity and precision in the articulation of each note. Breath management is essential to achieve this, as the long-sustained phrases require effective use of the appoggio to maintain consistent subglottic pressure and manage inhalation and exhalation efficiently. Despite the fast-moving notes, a smooth legato line must be preserved, necessitating seamless transitions and well-coordinated breath support and laryngeal function. This is the widest range in vocal pitch so far in *Kafka Fragments*: a two-octave range from B3 to Bflat5. The high notes call for a well-developed head voice and possibly mixed voice techniques to avoid strain. Proper support through the diaphragm and intercostal muscles is crucial to sustain the vocal line, to aid smooth transitions between different vocal registers, as well as to avoid noticeable breaks or changes in timbre, especially where the legato lines are specifically written over certain phrases.

In my practice diary (21/9/22), I wrote:

Spent a long time practising the pitches on page 2. Happy to have the C major of the bell to centre me beforehand...

Text becomes indecipherable when I'm trying to sing in tune. I mean the vowel of 'dir'. I find it impossible to keep that vowel pure throughout all of this coloratura (slow coloratura?). The depth needed for the vowel at the bottom on the C natural, for example, doesn't match the spread view at the top.

I experimented with my lips this time. It seems that pouting my lips helps my 'ih' vowel at the top.

My final observation about lip position relates specifically to vowel modification, a technique that can help a singer to maintain a consistent and balanced sound throughout their range. As the singer creates higher or lower pitches, the resonating space in the vocal tract naturally changes, and the vowels need to be modified to maintain a consistent and resonant sound. For example, the word 'dir' is sung over the whole of the range for this piece in one long phrase, with more head voice as the notes go up in the register.

I.11. 'Sonntag, Den 19. Juli 1910 (Berceuse II) [Sunday 19th July 1910 (Lullaby II)]'⁷⁶

The defining characteristic of this fragment (and its echo in part 3) is its rapidly switching mood back and forth to show sleepfulness and wakefulness. The slow, piano lines are easy to achieve a legato with, as they shift chromatically in small steps, but the accented demi- and semi-quavers

⁷⁶ [Slept, woke, slept, woke, miserable life.]

require the singer to navigate pitch accuracy across a wide range, mixing chest and head voice. The last ‘aufgewacht [awake]’ is marked ‘uneasy’ and ‘pianissimo’, so the singer must use increased breath flow to follow these instructions. The last line, ‘elendes leben’, is a small aria coda; with strong crotchets with tenuto markings, the singer can show the true power of their voice with full bodily connection and strong legato singing.

I.12. ‘Meine Ohrmuschel [My Ear]’⁷⁷

Here, we have another example of extended vocal technique by Kurtág; the singer is instructed to perform ‘prestissimo possibile [as fast as possible]’ with ‘Katzenartig Sprechgesang [cat-like speech-singing]’, which suggests a light and agile approach. The execution of this is at the singer’s discretion but is likely to be similar to the nasal sounds in number 7, where the vocal cords are tightened. However, Kurtág also marks the notes as sprechgesang, so there ought not to be any more tension on the cords than that which is similar to spoken words. The singer can use more breath in the sound to ensure that each note is connected smoothly, maintaining a gentle, even tone across the phrase. The notes should not be punched or separated; rather, they must flow into one another seamlessly.

I.14. ‘Umpanzert [Enarmoured]’⁷⁸

This is another inherently operatic movement with two long, virtuosic legato phrases. It is essential to maintain breath support throughout these phrases in order to keep the phrase balanced and even throughout its wide range. Moreover, balancing the brightness and depth of the voice when singing up to the higher tones (B3 and Dflat3) is important for resonating evenly.

I.15. ‘Zwei Spazierstöcke [Two Walking-Sticks]’⁷⁹

This is the first movement in *Kafka Fragments* where the vocalist speaks the text alone, interspersed with singing and sprechgesang. This should be declared with the same connection to the support muscles as the singing, for projection, but also for a smooth transition into the singing parts. The first sung phrase is accented crotchets spanning a two-octave range; the singer can maximise the chest voice in the lower register here. In the second line is another example of extended vocal technique; the G#3 is marked ‘geflüstert [whispered]’. The singer must use more breath to create this dramatic effect, which is optimal for proper bel canto singing.

⁷⁷ [My ear felt fresh to the touch, rough, cool, juicy, like a leaf.]

⁷⁸ [For a moment I felt enarmoured.]

⁷⁹ [On the stock of Balzac’s walking-stick: ‘I surmount all obstacles’. On mine: ‘All obstacles surmount me’. They have that ‘all’ in common.]

III.11. 'Staunend sahen wir das Grosse Pferd [Amazed, We Saw the Great Horse]'⁸⁰

Here is a good opportunity for the singer to approach a movement in more of an 'aria' style, as the range sits comfortably between Bb3 and Bb5. The singer must convey a sense of awe and wonder throughout the sustained notes, which can lead to a tendency to push for intensity rather than allowing for a relaxed and supported sound. This tension can disrupt the delicate balance required for bel canto singing, where the larynx should remain in a neutral position to facilitate optimal resonance. There is plenty of space, however, between each long note to employ a long legato line throughout.

IV.1. 'Zu Spät [Too Late]'⁸¹

The beginning movement of part four is one of the few longer movements of *Kafka Fragments*, lasting around four minutes in total. Once again, it is somewhat comparable to an aria in its duration and the short, cohesive story of the text. There is a small amount of rhythmic interest in chromatic tones to navigate in the mid-upper register of the voice (A4–E4).

There are multiple examples of Kurtág writing descending phrases over a wide range at a triple piano dynamic, which makes the transition of bringing the head voice down into the chest voice easier to navigate without pushing the cords. As the note values are often straight crotchets, such as on the third page, the singer can lean into the breath of each note and be led by the percussion of the text, similarly to operatic recitative.

IV.8. 'Es blendet uns die Mondnacht... [The Moonlit Night Dazzled Us...]'⁸²

This movement stylistically stands alone for the requirements of the soprano, as it is structured around extensive melismatic coloratura with rhythmic interest in interplay with the violin. It is somewhat virtuosic while remaining characteristically precise. We have a number of mordents, trills, and acciaccaturas in this movement which require the singer to be vocally flexible. Much of this movement is in the lower register for the soprano, down to a G3 at triple piano, so the resonances can be eased into the chest with the breath.

⁸⁰ [Amazed, we saw the great horse. It broke through the ceiling of our room. The cloudy sky scudded weakly along its mighty silhouette as its mane streamed in the wind.]

⁸¹ [Too late. The sweetness of sorrow and of love. To be smiled at by her in a rowing-boat. That was the most wonderful of all. Always just the yearning to die and the surviving, that alone is love.]

⁸² [The moonlit night dazzled us. Birds shrieked in the trees. There was a rush of wind in the fields. We crawled through the dust, a pair of snakes.]

Playfulness and Discipline

The most crucial link between biomechanics and the bel canto interpretation of *Kafka Fragments* is the balance between playfulness and discipline. This concept is reflected in the way the singer approaches the varied vocal techniques and theatrical elements. Simultaneously, physical discipline is required to anchor the technical demands, and a sense of playfulness can enhance creativity and spontaneity, allowing the singer to illuminate the intricate details of a fragment.

I.2. ‘Wie weg im Herbst [Like a Pathway in Autumn]’⁸³

This fragment begins in the lower-middle range of the voice, again a long legato line, this time with an appoggiatura as a mode of expression. The instruction is ‘calm-astonished’; if applied to the breath, the soft palette is lifted as a natural reflex and will affect the resonance of the voice, as the soft palate determines the balance between nasality and oral resonance, leading to a clearer and more articulated sound. The long, held D4 must be adequately supported in this position; while there are no dynamic markings until the third line, the essence of this movement is light and airy to reflect leaves being blown across a path. The staccato ending is marked as ‘dry’ and ‘without expression’; this can be achieved by the simple combination of supporting the breath into the resonance and cleanly articulating the text. (see appendix page 87 for example of rehearsal drawings).

I.3. ‘Verstecke [Hiding places]’⁸⁴

This is the first movement with a large and sudden dynamic contrast, from pianississimo to sudden forte (not too much!) for one bar to pianississimo again. The vocal technique to execute this requires adequate breath control for the staccato and quiet short notes, followed by an intake of breath in the rest and a reset of the diaphragm and intercostal muscles in order to support the swift transition between loud and soft. (See appendix page 89 for example of rehearsal drawings).

I.4. ‘Ruhelos [Restless]’

The minimal singing in this movement entails placing full emphasis on one word, and the last three notes are to be sung ‘without voice’ (presumably referring to the singing voice and resonant tone). This is marked with a cross on a quaver stem, which Kurtág defines as ‘in a speaking voice’. As it is also marked ‘pianississimo’, the singer can presume that the breath is used alone to create a sound. (See appendix page 88 for example of rehearsal drawings).

⁸³ [Like a pathway in autumn: hardly has it been swept clean, it is covered again with dry leaves.]

⁸⁴ [There are countless hiding places, but only one salvation; but then again, there are as many paths to salvation as there are hiding places.]

I.13. 'Einmal brach ich mir das Bein [Once I Broke My Leg]'⁸⁵

In the opening phrase, 'Einmal brach ich mir das Bein', which is marked 'moderato, ben tenuto [moderately and well-sustained]', the singer should ensure that the notes are sung with a sustained and even tone. The marking is 'mit humor'. Starting from the first note, the singer should sing with a full, resonant tone, ensuring that each note is connected smoothly to the next. The dynamic marking here is 'mezzo forte', indicating a moderately strong volume. However, the singer should avoid pushing the voice, maintaining a balanced and controlled sound.

II. 'Der Wahre Weg [The True Path]'⁸⁶

The text for this movement is fragmented and elongated over long phrases. The first page is low in tessitura for the soprano voice, requiring emphasis on chest voice resonance. The violin part is marked 'pianissimo'; however, there is no specific marking for the singer until the next phrase. The first rhythmical gesture leads into a long G#3, and later an even longer G3, which is extremely low in the soprano register. These are marked 'piano', and therefore are likely to be sung off the voice. It is unusual for a soprano to spend prolonged periods of time singing in this register, so it is beneficial to rely on natural chest resonances with minimal sub-glottal pressure, in order not to strain the voice. In an almost ironic hint to traditional bel canto practices, the start of the final phrase is marked 'quasi candenza'.

III.2. 'Der Coitus als Bestrafung [Coitus as Punishment]'⁸⁷

During the first few notes of this movement, which are both short and chromatic, in practice I was prone to over-blowing and becoming out of tune. The subito piano messa di voce on the word 'glückes' on a C#5 required me to float this note in my head voice. As the dynamic does not change, I found it easiest to carry my head voice into the chest register in order to achieve a diminuendo al niente. My practice diary focuses on characterisation:

Glückes – a comedic hint towards 'missing the mark' of happiness.

Acciacatura on 'punishment' acting as a flinch. Could be reflected in physical movement.

Quintuplet 'slowing down' suggests tediousness of being together. I see this as quite comical – a tongue-in-cheek fatalist view of a relationship. The chromatic notes suggest shapes of unstable structure – also in particular the quintuplet might be an eye-roll of disdain.

⁸⁵ [Once I broke my leg: it was the most wonderful experience of my life.]

⁸⁶ [The true path goes by of a rope that is suspended not high up, but rather just above the ground. Its purpose seems to be more to make one stumble than to be walked on.]

⁸⁷ [Coitus as punishment for the happiness of being together.]

The tessitura is low and therefore might be a mumble or a grumble – to oneself so the partner can't hear.

(Rolling of eyes – also perhaps the rolling over in bed to face away?)

IV.6. 'In memoriam Joannis Pilinszky [In Memory of Joannes Pilinszky]'⁸⁸

This anti-penultimate fragment mainly sits in the middle soprano register, almost like a small side-thought before the cycle finale. Because the text is fragmented into bits, the singer must keep the notion of the legato line flowing through the rests; in order to do this, the position of each note must be kept in place and the support constant throughout.

IV.7. 'Wiederum, Wiederum [Again, Again]'⁸⁹

In this movement, the soprano must be prepared to jump in haste between registers, keeping a low larynx and connection to the body in order to create an even and legato sound. The gusts of wind in the short crescendos and decrescendos must be controlled with proper breath support.

Summary

Grounded singing within the bel canto technique provides a basis from which to put forward the physical movements from the text. It can also identify where more active and ambitious physical movement might be a detriment to vocal production and where grander and more active gestures would be more appropriate, such as the singer running in the accompanying violin bars after singing in part I movement 9. Chapter Two will explain how the physical movement is developed for each musical movement, with part I being the most physically taxing. It is clear from my practice diaries and workings that in order for physical movement to be effective, the voice must be under control of the breath in order to be free to move with the body; rather than the body benefitting from being static, the use of breath aids the efficiency of the body both working to produce the voice and to move in the required manner.

⁸⁸ [I can't actually... tell a story; in fact, I am almost unable even to speak; when I try to tell it, I usually feel the way small children might when they try to take their first steps.]

⁸⁹ [Again, again, exiled far away, exiled far away. Mountains, desert, a vast country to be wandered through.]

Chapter Two

Using Movement to Enhance the Expressive Potential of *Kafka Fragments*

My aim, as stated previously, is to create my own language of movement for Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*. I will develop a way of notating a specific set of movement instructions for the piece, also defining the 'language of movement' and explaining how it is separate from choreography. Part of this may include assuming that the term 'choreography' is specifically used for movement in the context of dance, with specific instructions of movement for different styles, such as balletic topography and Laban notation. While my 'language of movement' is devised from the perspective of actor training as opposed to that of a dancer, I will utilise my study of Kafka's text, taking shape from the distribution of syllables, and recognise how this is reflected in the contours of the musical language and in turn translated into the counters and shapes of my movement.⁹⁰ Physical and gestural languages associated with musical performance practices exist throughout contemporary repertoire, such as *Inori* by Stockhausen, a 21st century composer with biopolitical designs to manage the physical body of the performer. Described as 'bodily music'⁹¹ – from which I will draw reference in its abstract state – the piece is for orchestra and one or two mute performers, who move (alone or in unison, respectively) in specific repeated gestures for the hour-long duration of the score. The notation is a collection of numbered drawings on separate cards, with the corresponding numbers ordered throughout the score. I will develop my own way of notating my movement, and the result is a ritual 'adoration'. In the same way that this is not sign language, nor will my choreography be.

Moving the Singing Body

The traditional body position for bel canto singing emphasises a stance that promotes optimal breath control and vocal production. Key elements include standing straight but relaxed, with feet shoulder-width apart to provide a stable base. Weight should be evenly distributed. The head should be aligned and balanced over the spine, not tilted forward or backward, to ensure an open airway. The diaphragm is engaged effectively by allowing the abdomen to expand naturally during inhalation and contract during exhalation.⁹² This is now considered a fairly old-fashioned view within the realms of opera. In my own experience playing Zerbinetta, I was challenged to sing while climbing over chairs in platform heels and a corset, being lifted and twirled by a quartet of clowns beneath me, true to

⁹⁰ Blum, S. 'Kurtág's articulation of Kafka's rhythms ("Kafka-Fragmente", Op. 24)', *Studia a Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*.

⁹¹ Peters, G. (1999) "...How creation is composed": Spirituality in the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen', translated by M. Schreiber and the author, *Perspectives of New Music*, 37(1), pp. 96–131.

⁹² Miller, R. (1986) *The structure of singing*. Schirmer.

Zerbinetta's character as a circus performer. In an extreme example, soprano Rainelle Krause has showcased on film her ability to perform Mozart's 'Der hölle rache' upside down in an aerobics routine.⁹³ Kate Lindsay, in the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Agrippina*, sang a portion of one of her arias while performing Pilates positions.⁹⁴ Multiple roles in the David McVicar production of *Giulio Cesare* at Glyndebourne required full choreography. Demanding physicality from opera singers within the realm of opera is now commonplace, often in order to compound the characters within the plot line and narrative of the piece. The combination of singing and acting requires exceptional vocal control and stamina, as well as the ability to convey emotion through both voice and body language. The maintenance of vocal technique while executing precise movements is something which should be balanced and nuanced, and, when executed successfully, can elevate the characterisation and narrative of the performance. One relevant example of this is Barbara Hannigan in front of an orchestra performing Ligeti's 'Mysteries of the Macabre'; although this is an operatic excerpt, it demands an abstract tapestry of extended vocal techniques, sprechgesang, and acrobatic coloratura from the singer, all sung with nonsense texts. Hannigan embodies the music: the visual aspect of her performance is striking, with exaggerated costumes and bold, theatrical movements that create a strong visual impact. The auditory experience is equally intense, with dissonant harmonies and fragmented melodies that challenge traditional musical expectations, much like how abstract expressionist artworks challenge visual expectations.⁹⁵

'The body... will carry with it the intentional threads linking it to its surrounding and finally reveal to us the perceiving subject as the perceived world', posits Maurice Merleau-Ponty.⁹⁶ Normally, in opera performance, the movement of the singer's body while singing is a narrative tool to support a character's psychological realism using Stanislavski's method.⁹⁷ I have previously used this method in order to present a distinct character in an opera or song cycle in the traditional form, but given the fragmented and abstract construction of the subject matter in *Kafka Fragments*, I utilise movement to compound the intention of the text and music outside of the dramatic sphere. In search of something more abstract to illuminate the text of Kafka and the concise music of Kurtág, Meyerhold's pioneering method of biomechanics as a tool for physical theatre seems to best represent this efficiency of abstract expression.

Prolific experimental theatre director Grotowski said in his essay 'On Poor Theatre':

⁹³ <https://youtu.be/P6jkAsyhdNw?si=TcP37xjXOukIU7yl>

⁹⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6H_z7rJXrU

⁹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jmzoIdiLKY>

⁹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, M. (1989) *Phenomenology of perception*. Translated by C. Smith. London: Routledge, 72.

⁹⁷ Stanislavski, K. (1936) *An actor prepares*. Bloomsbury.

I do not claim that everything we do is entirely new. We are bound consciously or unconsciously to be influenced by the traditions, science, and art, even by the superstitions and presentiments particular to the civilisation which has moulded us.⁹⁸

While Konstantin Stanislavski's method focuses on the internal world of the actor and the emotional truth of the character, Vsevolod Meyerhold's biomechanics emphasises the external expression of emotion through movement and gesture. By combining these two approaches, I can develop a more holistic and nuanced approach to performance that integrates both the psychological and physical aspects of Kafka's abstract texts. Meyerhold was a proponent of physical training and ensemble-based performance, advocating for a more external and physical approach to acting that prioritised movement, gesture, and expression. In his biomechanical system, Meyerhold sought to develop a universal language of movement that could be used to convey emotion and meaning on stage. Drawing inspiration from the principles of constructivism and the mechanisation of the body, Meyerhold's biomechanics focused on the precise and dynamic use of the actor's body as a tool for expression. It was formulated during the 1920s in Soviet Russia, representing one of the most significant departures from psychological realism in 20th century theatre. Conceived as a counterpoint to Stanislavski's emphasis on internal emotional states, biomechanics foregrounded 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. In this sense, biomechanics was not merely a technical system but an ideological project, aligning theatrical practice with the Soviet vision of industrial modernity and collective labour.

Historically, biomechanics emerged during a period of radical experimentation in Russian theatre, when directors sought to dismantle the illusionistic conventions of naturalism. Meyerhold's productions often employed bare, scaffolded stages, geometric movement patterns, and simplified costumes, all of which facilitated the actor's physical dynamism and underscored the theatricality of performance. The actor, in Meyerhold's conception, was akin to a skilled artisan, whose craft demanded rigorous training in balance, rhythm, and coordination through structured etudes such as *Throwing the Stone* and *The Slap*. These exercises cultivated an economy of motion and expressive precision, enabling performers to communicate complex ideas through corporeal forms rather than psychological introspection.

⁹⁸ Grotowski, J. (2022) *Towards a poor theatre*. Routledge.

The trajectory of biomechanics was abruptly curtailed in the 1930s under Stalinist cultural policy, which condemned Meyerhold's work as 'alien to Soviet art' and mandated adherence to socialist realism. Meyerhold's theatre was dismantled, and the director himself fell victim to political persecution. Nevertheless, the principles of biomechanics exerted a lasting influence on actor training, contributing to the incorporation of physical technique into Soviet drama schools and shaping the evolution of physical theatre throughout the 20th century.

In contemporary practice, biomechanics has experienced a notable revival, particularly through the efforts of pedagogues such as Gennadi Bogdanov and institutions such as GITIS and the Tufts Institute. Modern adaptations of Meyerhold's system respond to the increasing demands placed on actors in a globalised theatre landscape, where versatility and physical expressivity are paramount. As Baldwin observes, American actor training remains dominated by psychological realism, yet biomechanics offers a compelling alternative: one that integrates movement, rhythm, and spatial awareness into the actor's repertoire, thereby expanding the possibilities of embodied performance.

The relevance of biomechanics today lies in its capacity to address the limitations of text-centric and psychologised approaches to acting. In an era characterised by interdisciplinary performance, immersive theatre, and digital hybridity, Meyerhold's emphasis on external action, precision, and rhythmic structure resonates strongly. It equips actors with tools to navigate diverse performance contexts, from devised theatre to motion capture, reaffirming the enduring significance of Meyerhold's vision for a theatre grounded in the expressive potential of the human body.

The exacting nature of Meyerhold's etudes struck me as a method of movement comparable to Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*. If the method of a Stanislavski narrative assessment applies well to the character within the pre-existing naturalistic world of an opera plot or song cycle, the stylised precision and compact nature of an etude seem to match the form of Kurtág's fragmented music. As Jonathan Pitches notes, these biomechanical principles are defined terms that "provide form and structure on stage, explicit rhythmic choices, freedom within boundaries, a common language, and the ability to think in musical terms from the outset."⁹⁹ The skills Meyerhold aimed to elicit from his actors were precision, balance, coordination, efficiency, playfulness, and rhythm.

Meyerhold said that 'pauses are attractive to a good actor... That's why an intelligent sense of self-restraint is so necessary'.¹⁰⁰ Pauses and rests in music share a profound connection with breaths and

⁹⁹ Pitches, J. (2003) *Vsevolod Meyerhold*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 113–117

¹⁰⁰ Schmidt, P. *Meyerhold at work*. Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 156.

pauses in acting, as both serve as vital elements of expression and emotional depth in their respective art forms. In music, rests provide moments of silence that create tension, highlight key phrases, and allow the listener to absorb the emotional weight of the preceding notes. Similarly, pauses in acting offer actors the opportunity to breathe and reflect, enabling them to convey nuances of character and emotion effectively. Just as a well-placed rest can enhance the impact of a musical phrase, a strategic pause in dialogue can heighten dramatic tension, create anticipation, or evoke vulnerability. Both practices require an acute awareness of timing and rhythm; they invite the audience to engage more deeply with the narrative, facilitating a richer emotional experience.

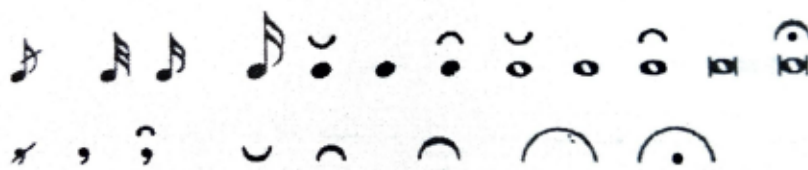


Figure 4. *Kafka Fragments.*

In *Kafka Fragments*, Kurtág employs his own unique system of rests as a dramatic tool for the singer, using silence to punctuate moments of emotional intensity and introspection. These intentional pauses serve not only to create space for reflection but also to emphasise the psychological complexity of the characters. By integrating these rests into the vocal line, Kurtág allows the singer to explore and communicate the subtleties of Kafka's themes, transforming silence into a powerful instrument of expression. This technique mirrors the pauses in acting, where silence can convey as much meaning as spoken words, enhancing the overall dramatic impact of the performance. Ultimately, the interplay of pauses in music and acting, combined with Kurtág's innovative approach, underscores the importance of silence and stillness as potent tools for storytelling, allowing both musicians and actors to communicate complex emotions and themes with greater resonance. Kurtág also seemed to have a specific interest in pauses as a dramatic device, describing them as 'the relative value of the rhythmic undecided notes and rests in increasing sequence':

This is an example not only of Kurtág's commitment to specificity, but also of his own interest in languages and communicating his music. It is also a further example of the latent theatricality in his music. Meyerhold's belief that they are an attractive tool for an actor implies that they are components of a dramatic moment.

Kurtág's and Meyerhold's Stages

Kurtág referred to the 'stage' in the pejorative sense a number of times. Williams offers comments on this,¹⁰¹ citing the original performer of *Kafka Fragments*, Adrienne Csengery. More specifically, Williams discusses the lack of works for the stage by Kurtág at this point in his writing, despite his compositions frequently being described as having dramatic qualities – often referred to as 'camouflaged operas'. The differences between drama and theatricality are discussed, alongside early examples of his use of physical gesture in his piano work *Játékok*. The focus of this article is to state that *Kafka Fragments* marks a 'decisive shift' in how the composer sees theatre in music, including the introduction of physical instructions for both singer and violinist in specific places. Adrienne Csengery occupies a foundational position in the performance history of György Kurtág's vocal music, particularly in relation to *Kafka Fragments* (Op. 24). As Kurtág's soprano of choice during the 1980s, Csengery was not merely an interpreter but an active collaborator whose work helped codify the idiomatic demands of Kurtág's fragmentary aesthetics. Her recordings (most notably the Hungaroton release (1992) with András Keller) constitute the first complete traversal of the cycle and remain a primary reference point. This interpretive primacy is reinforced by Csengery's linguistic fluency and cultural proximity: her idiomatic Hungarian and German enabled a nuanced negotiation of Kurtág's text-setting strategies, which oscillate between semantic precision and phonetic abstraction.

The role of the violinist is both musically and physically integral to the work's dialogue between voice and instrument. The violin acts as a vocal counterpart, expressing nuanced emotions through a range of techniques, such as pizzicato, glissandi, and harmonics, which create a vivid sound palette that complements the vocal lines. Physically, the violinist's presence on stage is equally significant; their body language and movements contribute to the overall interpretation of the piece, embodying the tension and introspection inherent in the music. The physicality of the performance, from the subtleties of bowing to the expressive gestures, enhances the connection between the music and the text, allowing the violinist to serve not only as a performer but as a vital storyteller who bridges the worlds of sound and literature, drawing the audience into the emotional landscape of Kafka's fragmented narratives. My autoethnographic study is of my own gendered body as a response to the music; the space within the stage is also a physical dialogue with the violinist. In *Bodied Spaces*,¹⁰² Garner argues that the body is not just a vessel for expression but an active participant in creating meaning within a performance. He examines how spatial configurations influence the interactions between performers and audiences, highlighting the importance of physicality in conveying emotion and narrative. Dra-

¹⁰¹ Williams, A.E. *Music theatre and presence in some works of György Kurtág*. Akadémiai Kiadó, pp. 359–370.

¹⁰² Garner, S. (1994) *Bodied spaces*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

matic musical writing directly translates to a physicality which demands consideration of the presentation of the work, in this case framing the theatrical within a new dimension of the gap between a traditional recital and operatic staging.

This development of Kurtág's approach to theatre is a step toward his eventual composition of *Fin de Partie*. Earlier use of Beckett's text in Kurtág's works is considered by Zenck,¹⁰³ who argues that Kurtág's *What is the Word?* (based on the Beckett play) alongside *Kafka Fragments* are true dramatic works. While both *Kafka Fragments* and *What is the Word?* fit into the traditional formation of song recitals designed to be performed in the formal, static environment of the concert hall (as the composer presumably intended), it is possible that their inherent dramatic qualities come from the music and text of the composition itself and that they are already equipped to fulfil their dramatic potential. The implication of Kurtág's eventual move to composing *Fin de Partie* as a fully staged opera is that the drama is *repressed* as opposed to latent, which I interpret as an affordance to dramatise and physicalise it myself.

One interesting continuation of Kurtág's disposition to a lack or restriction of physicality and movement is echoed throughout *Fin de Partie*. One of the characters, Hamm, is confined to a wheelchair, which is a rarity on the operatic stage. Two of the characters are in bins for most of the opera, with their movement completely restricted. With these dramatic choices, Kurtág challenges traditional notions of physical expression in opera. This choice reflects a deliberate exploration of restriction and confinement, emphasising the emotional and psychological states of the characters over their physicality. Through these choices, he suggests that the essence of operatic expression can transcend physical movement. The limitations imposed on the characters may serve to amplify their inner lives, allowing the music and vocal delivery to be the focal point, therefore highlighting the emotional depth and complexity of the characters, suggesting that profound experiences can be conveyed without the need for extensive physicality. Additionally, this approach may invite the audience to engage with the themes of isolation and existential struggle, as the physical constraints of the characters mirror broader human conditions; similar themes are reflected in *Kafka Fragments*. In this way, Kurtág's disposition reflects a thoughtful contemplation of how music and voice can articulate the human experience, even in the absence of traditional movement and physicality, ultimately redefining the operatic experience.

In addition to Kurtág's contradictory relationship with drama, we are also at odds in the dramatic sphere with Kafka's self-professed lack of musicality:

¹⁰³ Zenck, M. *Beckett after Kurtág: Towards a theory of theatrically of a non-theatrical music*.

Das Wesentliche meiner Unmusikaliät, daß ich Musik nicht Zusammenhang end genießen kann, nur hie und da entsteht eine Wirkung in mir, und wie selten ist die eine musikalische. Die gehrte Musik zieht natürlich eine Mauer um mich, und meine einzig dauernde musikalische Beinflussung ist die, daß ich, so eingesperrt, anders bin als frei.¹⁰⁴

[It is precisely in the possibility for the actor to improvise that drama is distinct from opera. In opera the conductor does not permit the extension of any temporal sections, and only the tempi can be extended... I will never renounce the right to stimulate an actor to improvise. The only important thing in improvisation is that the secondary concerns do not overwhelm the main thing, which is the matter of timing, and of the interdependence of temporal sections on stage.]¹⁰⁵

One of the key concepts that emerges from the study of Meyerhold's work is the idea of the actor as a multifaceted and dynamic performer who can embody a range of emotions and characters through a combination of internal and external techniques. By drawing on both psychological realism and physical expression, actors can create performances that are rich, complex, and engaging for audiences.

Meyerhold's etudes, or studies, are short, focused exercises that he developed as part of his biomechanical training method for actors. These etudes are designed to promote physical precision, flexibility, expressiveness, and bodily control. By breaking down movement into its essential components and practising specific gestures, poses, and sequences, actors can refine their physical skills and explore the potential of movement as a tool for expression. This is similar to Taylor's method of motion economy, or the idea that unnecessary and wasteful motions can be eliminated or minimised to increase productivity. According to Taylor, by carefully studying and standardising work methods, time and effort can be saved, leading to increased output and reduced fatigue.¹⁰⁶ 'In the past', he writes, 'the man has been first; in the future the system must be first'.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Kafka, *Tagebücher*, p. 139: 'The essence of my lack of musicality: that I am incapable of enjoying music coherently. Only once in a while does a response spring forth within me – and how infrequently is this effect a musical one. The music I hear, as a matter of course, erects a wall around me, and the only lasting impression music makes on me is that, sequestered in this manner, I am in no sense.'

¹⁰⁵ Schmidt, P. *Meyerhold at work*. Applause Theatre Book Publishers, p. 156.

¹⁰⁶ Taylor, F.W. (1911) *The principles of scientific management*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

This principle of Taylorism mirrors the impetus of biomechanics, in that the physical movement is the start of the movement, with the result being the secondary outcome. In Taylorism, this is the ‘man’ and productivity; for Meyerhold, it is the movement which comes first in order to convey an emotion. Therefore, while both Taylor’s motion economy and Meyerhold’s biomechanics involve the optimisation of physical movement, their objectives and applications differ significantly. Taylor’s motion economy is concerned with improving efficiency and reducing wasted motion in a work environment, while Meyerhold’s biomechanics focuses on enhancing the physical performance and expressive capabilities of actors on stage. In the context of physical movement, performers can benefit from understanding how to optimise their movements on stage to convey meaning effectively, conserve energy, and avoid unnecessary physical strain.

One of the key reasons why Meyerhold’s etudes are considered a good vehicle for expression is their emphasis on the relationship between movement and emotion. Through the repetition and refinement of specific physical actions, actors can discover how different gestures and postures can convey a wide range of emotions and moods. By isolating and practising individual movements, actors can learn to embody specific emotional states and intentions through their bodies, allowing them to communicate with clarity and depth on stage. Meyerhold’s etudes are designed to challenge actors to push beyond their comfort zones and explore new ways of moving and expressing themselves, which lends itself to the task of conveying abstract modernism. By engaging in physically demanding exercises and experimenting with different movement qualities, actors can expand their range of expression and develop a greater sense of physical freedom and creativity. This process of exploration and discovery can lead to new insights and discoveries about the body’s potential for expression.

Furthermore, Meyerhold’s etudes provide a structured and systematic approach to physical training that helps actors build strength, coordination, and agility. By practising these exercises regularly and with focus, actors can improve their physical fitness and develop a greater sense of body awareness and control, which is compounded by the foundation of bel canto technique examined in Chapter One. This heightened physical awareness can enhance an actor’s presence on stage and their ability to engage with the space around them, dispelling the need for a cohesive narrative or a traditional operatic set or scene. In turn, this may afford the singer heightened vocal awareness, as the music’s technical requirements are similarly strength, coordination, and agility.

Kurtág’s *Kafka Fragments* is characterised by its fragmented structure, with each piece presenting a brief, concentrated exploration of a particular theme or emotion. Kurtág’s compositions are often sparse and intense, with a focus on economy of expression and the evocation of complex emotions

through concise musical gestures. Both Meyerhold's etudes and Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments* share a focus on fragmentation and experimentation in their respective art forms; Meyerhold's etudes break down movement into its essential components and allow performers to explore different physical qualities and expressions, while Kurtág's compositions condense complex emotions and ideas into brief, concentrated musical gestures. Both works invite performers to engage in concentrated exploration to push the boundaries of expression.

The economics of Grotowski's 'poor theatre', combined with Taylor's principle of 'motion economy' and projected through Meyerhold's biomechanics, reflects the economic, precise qualities of Kurtág's fragmented writing. The duration of each fragment is so short that it can be assumed that every compositional choice has been selected for an efficient purpose. As we know from Williams's record of an interview with Csengery (Kurtág's original soprano for *Kafka Fragments*),¹⁰⁸ Kurtág expressed an aversion to staging or theatrical movement in his works, despite critics of the time frequently describing his music as possessing 'dramatic' qualities. Csengery said, 'We didn't think about staging... never. Kurtág never bothers himself with the stage. On the contrary'. She also described theatrical gestures when working with Kurtág as 'disallowed means', but she thought that 'in the depths of his soul it is clear that he writes dramas'. Csengery's voice was distinctive for its clarity, agility, and ability to sustain extreme dynamic contrasts across a wide tessitura. In the Hungaroton recording of *Kafka Fragments*¹⁰⁹ her interpretation demonstrates a soprano instrument that combines crystalline timbre in the upper register with remarkable control in the lower range. This flexibility reveals Kurtág's compositional intent: he writes for a voice capable of rapid shifts between speech-like declamation, whispered tones, and pure, sustained pitches, often within a single fragment.

Considering that it took Kurtág until the age of 93 to finally compose *Fin de Partie*, going back on his established stance on the inclusion of staging and drama within his work, I am compelled to revisit something as dramatically enticing as *Kafka Fragments* and draw movement from within the text and music. As it is the music 'itself' which is described as having dramatic qualities, my aim is to avoid additional narrative in the operatic context and investigate what it is about the composition of the work that makes it so dramatic. There are some occasions within *Kafka Fragments* where stage positions are notated; for example, in number 12 of part III, where a second violin is added to dramatise the scene on the tram in which the dancer Eduardowa travels in the company of two violinists, Kurtág offers small diagrams to show the set-up of the two respective music stands and the singer (see Figure

¹⁰⁸ Williams, A.E. (1999) 'The literary sources of Kurtág's fragment form', *Contemporary Music Review*, 18(2), pp. 141–150.

¹⁰⁹ Kurtág, G., Csengery, A. and Keller, A. (1992) *Kafka-Fragmente, Op. 24*. Hungaroton, HCD 31135. Recorded at Calvary Church, Szombathely, Hungary

5). This implies that Kurtág did, in fact, consider some element of staging, at least to offer a solution for the change in required forces. I am interested in bringing this latent theatricality to the surface in my performance.

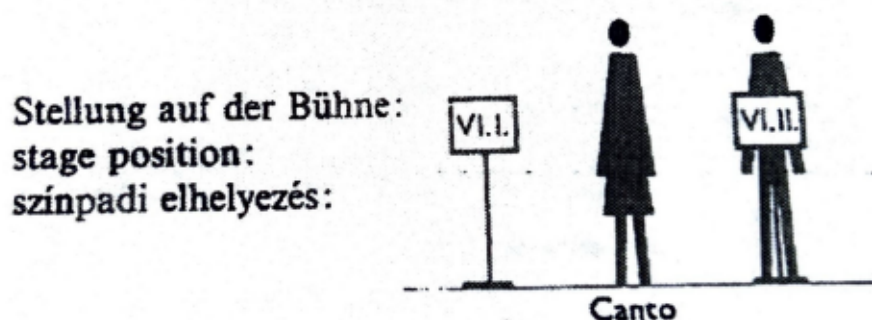
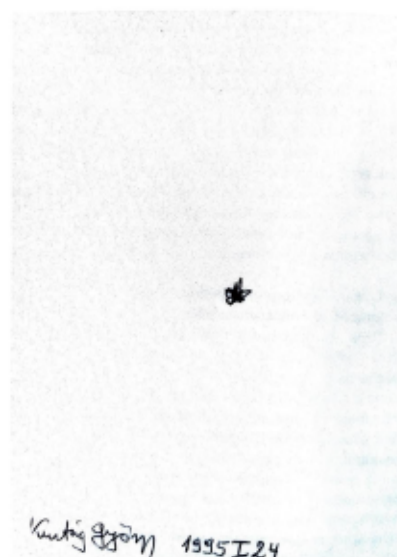
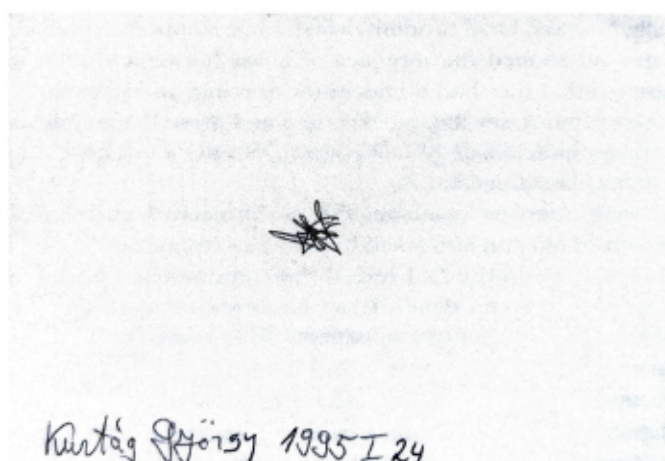


Figure 5. *Kafka Fragments*, page 44

The Drawings of Kurtág and Kafka

Interviewer Bálint András Varga asked a number of composers, including Kurtág, to draw a graphic image to represent their music.¹¹⁰ Kurtág responded with three drawings, the first two of which were very similar (although he specified, “They don’t really *reflect* my music; I’d prefer to say I would be happy if my music were like that”) (see figures 6a and 6b):



Figures 6a (left) and 6b (right).

¹¹⁰ Varga, B.A. (2009) *György Kurtág: Three interviews and Ligeti homages*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, p. 14.

These tiny, condensed drawings offer a tantalising 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*. The compressed and dense composition of these drawings could also be as crude as a bug 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 insect. The angular shapes and sharp lines within the drawings also reflect on an aesthetic level the common vocabulary Kafka used in his 1903–1907 sketchbook of physical drawings:



Figures 7a *Franz Kafka, the drawings* (left) **and 7b** *rehearsal photograph* (right).

Considering my search for connections across the rich tapestry of my project, it is interesting to note how similar in shape Figures 7a and 7b appear. Figure 7b is a rehearsal photo in which I am raising myself from the floor using a technique of biomechanics called a spiral; while my bodily shape is not the same, both images share a minimalist quality that focuses on the singular form of the figure. The prominent use of contrast in each image accentuates the spiral or circular shape of the body, creating a cohesive visual language that bridges the abstract silhouette with the detailed photograph. This aesthetic connection underscores the exploration of human form and movement, highlighting the dynamic interplay between abstract and realistic representation.

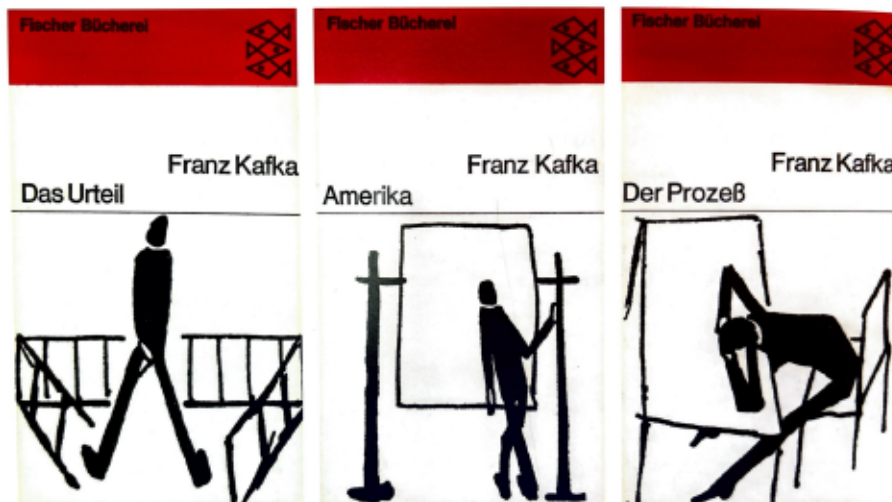


Figure 8, *Franz Kafka, the drawings.*

Max Brod, a close friend and literary executor of Franz Kafka, played a crucial role in preserving Kafka's literary works and personal belongings after the author's death in 1924.¹¹¹ Among these items were Kafka's drawings, which Brod acquired and kept in his possession for many years. However, Brod chose not to publish Kafka's drawings during his lifetime, as he primarily focused on promoting Kafka's literary legacy and did not consider the drawings to be of significant importance or relevance. After Brod's death in 1968, his estate, including Kafka's drawings, was passed to his secretary and confidante, Esther Hoffe.¹¹² Hoffe continued to safeguard Kafka's drawings and other manuscripts, but she faced legal challenges regarding the ownership and disposition of these materials. It was not until after Hoffe's death in 2007 that the ownership of Kafka's drawings was finally settled, leading to their eventual publication in 2019.

Despite the complex legacy of Kafka's literary estate, the eventual release of Kafka's drawings in 2019 allowed for a new appreciation of this lesser-known aspect of Kafka's artistic output, providing further insight into the multifaceted creativity of one of the most celebrated writers of the 20th century. Andres Kilcher observes,

His repetition of certain subjects and his exercises demonstrate how seriously he took this search for forms, figures and postures. Through these variations he gained experience and

¹¹¹ Cohen, N. (2015) 'The betrayed(?) wills of Kafka and Brod', *Law and Literature*, 27(1), pp. 1–21.

¹¹² Tran, M. (2010) 'Lawyers open cache of unpublished Kafka manuscripts', *The Guardian*.

skill, which he was then able to put into practice. He developed a fundamental vocabulary of forms, which he could then recall and apply as needed.¹¹³

Kafka's artistic representations of the human form exhibit a nuanced engagement with corporeal aesthetics, reflecting his intricate introspections on physicality and identity. Noteworthy within his style are the divergent portrayals of what we may presume to be male and female figures, each bearing distinct thematic resonances and stylistic treatments that underscore Kafka's multifaceted exploration of bodily representation. In Kafka's depictions of male subjects, a recurrent motif emerges wherein anatomical proportions are manipulated to evoke a discordant and disquieting visual effect. Limbs are often elongated, contorted, or distorted, faces obscured or devoid of detailed features, and postures rendered in twisted or unnatural configurations. This deliberate distortion of the male form serves to disrupt normative ideals of physical beauty and symmetry, foregrounding the fragility and imperfections inherent in corporeal existence.

Conversely, Kafka's portrayals of female figures exhibit a parallel yet distinct approach, characterised by nuanced explorations of femininity and embodiment. Within these renderings, Kafka employs a refined visual language that conveys a sense of vulnerability and introspection unique to the female form. Features may be softened or accentuated, postures imbued with grace or poise, and expressions imbued with a profound sense of interiority and emotional depth. Through this nuanced treatment, Kafka invites contemplation on the complexities of gendered identity and the societal constructs that shape notions of femininity.



Figure 9. *Franz Kafka, The Drawings.*

¹¹³ Kilcher, A. (2022) *Franz Kafka, the drawings*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 331.

Across both male and female representations, Kafka's figures often exist within a realm of isolation or estrangement, evoking a pervasive sense of psychological dislocation and existential unrest. The absence of contextual cues or narrative frameworks further heightens this atmosphere of alienation, prompting viewers to confront the enigmatic mysteries and existential anxieties embedded within the human condition. Kafka prompts a re-evaluation of conventional perceptions of corporeal aesthetics, inviting a contemplation of the profound enigmas that underlie the nuances of gendered embodiment.

Kurtág's third drawing for Varga he described as 'the maximum that I can achieve in the way of representing a human being':



Figure 10. Drawing by Kurtág, Varga, B.A. (2009) György Kurtág: *Three interviews and Ligeti homages*.

The abstract nature of the drawing might represent the fluidity and complexity of Kafka's compositions, suggesting movement and emotion rather than something concrete. This aligns with Kurtág's known style of creating intense, expressive, and sometimes sparse musical pieces. The continuous, looping lines create a sense of fluid motion, much like how music can flow and change dynamically. The lines do not adhere to rigid structures, suggesting freedom and expressiveness. The most interesting aspect of this drawing is the fact that it is exclusively figures without any instruments, it seems, interacting with each other. The figures appear to be in various poses or states of movement, which implies physical expression, or dancing, as there are multiple figures. This aligns with the idea of latent theatricality within Kurtág's music, where visual and physical elements play a significant role alongside the auditory experience, even though they are not his sole purpose in writing. The varying thickness and direction of the lines create a visual rhythm, which might mirror the dynamic changes in Kurtág's compositions. His music often features sudden shifts, contrasts, and a wide range of expressions – such as *Kafka Fragments* – which I see as theatrical in nature. Overall, the drawing encapsulates

an abstract representation of movement, emotion, and possibly storytelling, all of which are key components of theatricality. This aligns well with what is known about Kurtág's music, which often conveys deep emotional narratives and vivid expressive contrasts.

Fragments in the Form of an Etude

While Meyerhold's etudes and Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments* are distinct works in different artistic media, we can draw parallels between them in terms of their focus on fragmentation, experimentation, and exploration of expression. Meyerhold's concept of biomechanics represents a radical departure from naturalistic movement in the theatre of the stage, emphasising angular movements that embody a more stylised and dynamic form of expression. Unlike naturalistic movements, which aim to mimic real-life actions and behaviours, Meyerhold's biomechanics focuses on the precision and clarity of physical gestures to convey emotion and narrative. This approach utilises angularity – sharp, geometric shapes and movements that often exaggerate the body's lines and angles – to create a heightened sense of theatricality. By employing these angular movements, Meyerhold sought to evoke a more visceral response from the audience, encouraging them to engage with the performance on an intellectual and emotional level. This method contrasts sharply with naturalism, which tends to prioritise realism and psychological depth over the abstract and symbolic potential of the human body in motion. Consequently, Meyerhold's biomechanics invites a re-evaluation of the relationship between movement and meaning in performance, challenging traditional notions of representation in theatre.

My language of movement for *Kafka Fragments* is based around the central idea that part I is my own version of Meyerhold's etudes in each of this part's 19 movements. Here, we learn the motifs and shapes of the language which will be extrapolated and developed in parts III and IV (while part II is a singular pathway and an extension of the movement for 'the good march in step'), this time with more of the shape and momentum of a Meyerhold etude. Below, I give some examples of how the shapes have been extracted from the movements in part I.

1.1. Die guten gehn im gleichen Schritt...

Die guten gehn im gleichen Schritt. Ohne von ihnen zu wissen tanzen die andern um sie die Tänze der Zeit. [The good march in step. Unaware of them, the others dance around them the dances of time.]

The opening piece of *Kafka Fragments* begins as an ostinato in the violin part, representing 'the good march in step'.

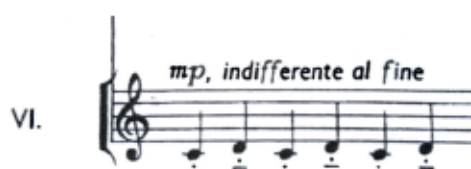


Figure 11. *Kafka Fragments I.1.*

Therefore, my first fragment etude begins with a march. Initially, the singer matches the march of the violin in her entry, but this soon becomes dislodged into dotted crotchets against the steady crotchets, building up to the imminence of the ‘others’.



Figures 12a *Franz Kafka, the drawings (left) and 12b rehearsal photograph (right).*

The first line of the music is split into four bars of six crotchets, which led me to design an off-beat march autonomously on the beat of each crotchet: on the first beat, both feet are on the ground; on the second beat, one leg is swung in the air as in Figure 12b; and on the third crotchet, the foot is released onto the ground. I drew inspiration for how exactly to shape my body while swinging my leg from one of Kafka’s drawings in his sketchbook (1901–1907), combined with the efficiency of movement used in biomechanics. The next position is taken towards the end of the first line, after the soprano’s part has become displaced with the violinist’s rhythm. For the first time, there is a held note – a minim tied to a dotted crotchet. I wanted to reflect the dances of time as something ancient, so I chose a position inspired by hand-held folk dancing, a common motif in dances from various cultures over time, from ancient Greek khoros to a modern-day ceilidh. Although my hands are empty, the movement helps to elevate the thought that there are ‘others’ dancing the same dance. Moreover, while I am standing still, this position implies a sense of circular motion:



Figure 13 *Rehearsal photograph.*

This transition leads into my next movement.



Figure 14 *Kafka Fragments* page 1.

As my aim was for the musical composition to represent the dance, I wanted to use the shape of the dotted semi-quavers and demi-semi-quavers and apply it to the movement of my foot. A running theme I sought to illuminate in various places throughout *Kafka Fragments* was the notion of Kurtág's latent theatricality struggling against through the imposition of this physicality; therefore, I lifted my foot fractionally on an F flat and a fraction higher on an F natural, with my toes still on the floor, grounded, stationary, and with a feeling of resistance. The last group of six crotchets of the fragment are used to move my arms from their position in Figure 4, crotchet by crotchet, down to my sides, like the arms of a broken ticking clock.

I.2. Wie ein Weg im Herbst

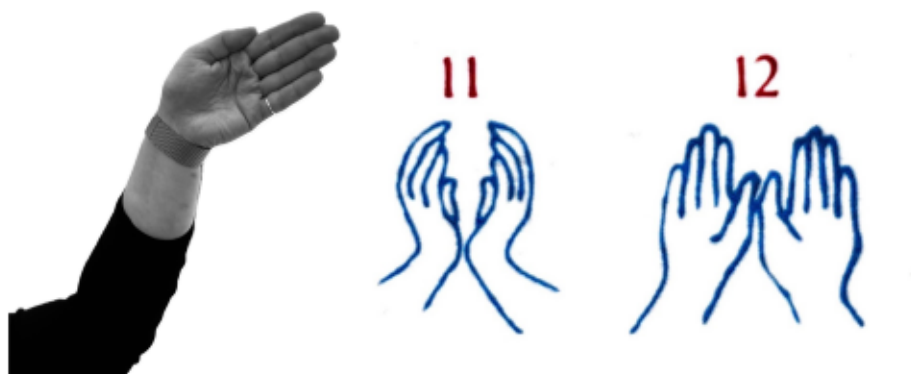
Wie ein Weg im Herbst: Kaum ist er reingekehrt; bedeckt er sich wieder mit den trockenen Blättern.
[Like a path in autumn: hardly is it swept clean, before it decks itself again with dry leaves.]

Kurtág uses melismatic gestures to signify gusts of wind. As my arms have come down to my sides in the previous movement, they are now blown upwards in the shape of the quavers indicated. In this movement is the first use of one of Kurtág's rests (see Figure 1). Meyerhold stressed how important rests are to an actor, so I wanted to physicalise these musical moments as they came. Because this fragment thus far has largely comprised armography, it made sense to continue the character journey of the arms to form the rest (in this instance, the equivalent length of a semi-breve):



Figure 15. *Rehearsal photo.*

Throughout this movement, I treated my hands as if they were the leaves in question – this makes sense, as they are attached to my arms as leaves might be to a branch. As previously mentioned, one of my inspirations for building my own language of movement was Stockhausen's *Inori*, where the integration of music and movement is reapplied via ritualistic gestures that are synchronised with the music. These gestures are meticulously notated in the score, and the performers must learn and execute them with precision, the most important of which are a series of hand gestures with a visually descriptive guide of 16 movements. Based on this, I married the shape of Stockhausen's hands to Kurtág's image of a leaf:



Figures 16a *Stockhausen Inori* (left) and **Figure 16b** *Rehearsal photograph* (right).

Kurtág decorates this fragment with the falling leaves in staccato quaver form, the movements for which correspond to sharp hand movements to follow the jagged shape of the notes. A whisky glissando at a high register indicates the leaves being blown onto my face as a transition into the next fragment (another gesture to *Inori*). While I do not intend to favour one reference, in this instance it serves as a transitional theme between two fragments.

I.3. Verstecke

Verstecke sind unzählige. Rettung nur eine, aber Möglichkeiten der Rettung wieder so viele wie Verstecke. [There are countless hiding places, but only one salvation; but then again, there are as many paths to salvation as there are hiding places.]

This *Inori* instruction covers the eyes but does not show the whole body, and I found a corresponding drawing within Kafka's sketchbooks:



Figure 17 *Stockhausen Inori*.



Figure 18a *Rehearsal photograph (left) and 18b* *Franz Kafka, The Drawings (right).*

‘Verstekke’ is one of the few movements in which the text is repeated within the full cycle, although with slightly altered music. As I am now using the leaves to hide my face, it is possible to play with this idea of hiding places, revealing each eye in sequence and in rhythm with the sung line. This continues through this fragment, with a marking of the cross across my body on the word ‘salvation’.

I.4. Ruhelos

Ruhelos. [Restless.]

This is the first fragment in which we receive explicit theatrical direction from Kurtág: ‘The piece should be a sort of pantomime. The singer follows the acrobatics and the rage of the violinist with increasing tension, excitement, moreover fear, until her voice fails at the end’.¹¹⁴ As this fragment is a pantomime, I sought to extract the whimsical shapes achieved by the legato violin slurs of multiple quavers at a time.



Figure 19 *Kafka Fragments* page 4.

¹¹⁴ Kurtág, G. (1985–1986) *Kafka Fragments für Sopran und Violine Op. 24*. Edition Musica Budapest.

This has a comical lumber to it, which I physicalised using another character from Kafka's sketch-books:



Figure 20a *Franz Kafka, The Drawings (left) and 20b* *Rehearsal photograph (right).*

As the singer is instructed before their last breath to 'exhale exhausted', it felt apt to end the pantomime by collapsing on the floor.

Structuring *Kafka Fragments*

As detailed above, part I of *Kafka Fragments* comprises 19 miniature etudes, which in my performance are influenced by the etudes in Meyerhold's biomechanical training. This sets up the vocabulary of the language of physical movement which is extrapolated over the next three musical movements. In part II, 'Der wahre Weg [The True Path]' (homage-message to Pierre Boulez) is unique within *Kafka Fragments* as the longest movement, at around 7 minutes:

The true path goes by of a rope that is suspended not high up, but rather just above the ground. Its purpose seems to be more to make one stumble than to be walked on.

The movement 'Der wahre Weg [The True Path]' serves as a bridge between the first and third parts of Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*, providing a moment of respite and reflection amidst the work's fragmented and intense musical language. Structurally, this movement stands apart from the surrounding movements, being the only continuous, uninterrupted section within the larger cycle. This formal distinction is reinforced by the shift in musical character and texture, offering a contrast to the more episodic and disjunctive nature of the surrounding fragments. The movement begins with a sparse, contemplative violin line, establishing a serene, introspective mood. The vocal part enters shortly after, initially in a low register, with a long, sustained melody that unfolds in a gentle, rocking motion. This lyrical, song-like quality is a departure from the more declamatory, speech-like vocal writing that permeates much of the work. Harmonically, it is characterised by a sense of tonal ambiguity and harmonic stasis. The violin part revolves around a limited pitch collection, often centring on a single pitch or oscillating between two notes, creating a sense of harmonic suspension and stillness. The vocal line, while more melodically active, also avoids clear tonal centres, instead floating above the sparse, undulating violin accompaniment.

The overall texture of the movement is meagre and transparent, with the violin and voice often operating in a call-and-response manner, or weaving independent yet complementary melodic lines. This transparency allows the performers to focus on the nuances of timbre, articulation, and the interplay between the two instruments, fostering a meditative, almost ritualistic quality. The singer's part is largely free-flowing, with occasional moments of more defined rhythmic activity, while the violin part maintains a steady, unhurried pulse. This creates a sense of temporal ambiguity, where the music seems to exist outside of a strict metrical framework, evoking a timeless, contemplative atmosphere.

Due to the musical structure of this movement, this passage of time has the feeling of being unravelled in slow motion. This unravelling should in turn apply to the movement language established in part I. The shape of the manuscript is presented as one long line; this brings us back to the initial theme of the piece: while the 'others' have been dancing the dances of time, the good still march in step. Therefore, I have used the marching movement motif to create a minimalist image of the singer walking a precarious tightrope.

The first movement of part III opens with an echo to part I, snapping us back to the musical language established in the first section. There are a number of movements in this part which are direct counterparts to movement I, returning to the Taylorist efficiency of movement, abbreviations of language, Taylorist extensions of the movements, reflections, and 'full sentences'. There are echoes of other

fragments falling away and coming back into the foreground again, like a memory. In the interest of clarity, combined with efficiency of communication, each fragment in this part will receive abbreviated and less frequent attention.

Now that I have established a language of movement, I will use part IV to communicate this language in relation to the music and running themes through the piece in the most efficient ways. The language now becomes conceptual, reflecting wider themes to make space for the complex music and longer fragments. As the music itself becomes less fragmented and more cohesive, the movement begins to offer bigger shapes and broader themes. Using a made-up language of movement for parts I, II, and III of Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments* to inform part IV offers a unique opportunity to communicate broader themes through the deliberate spacing and fragmentation of those movements. By taking the established movements from the earlier sections and dispersing them in part IV, one can create a sense of disconnection and fragmentation that reflects the themes of isolation, alienation, or existential uncertainty often present in Kafka's work. Spacing out the elements of movement can evoke a sense of time stretching or elongation, suggesting the weight of emotional burden or the feeling of being trapped in one's thoughts. Slow, deliberate repetitions of specific gestures can further emphasise the development of the language. See the Appendix for how I mapped out the shapes in some of the movements during rehearsal.

Sample from Movement Practice Diary (24/2/2022)

Today's session was focused on topography, which was defined as 'plotting your places' on stage by drawing and assigning your own map.

We warmed up as normal with some yoga, transitioning into learning how to fall to the floor in a spiral movement. We practised this, and assigned different Laban efforts each time in order to give the movement different intentions, i.e. being pushed to the floor and rising with caution, or falling in religious ecstasy and being drawn up again by the light.

Next, I began to walk and draw the topography of a hypothetical version of the first few movements of *Kafka Fragments*. It became immediately apparent that while it was useful to map my route on the stage, I would need a 'map within a map' of each destination, and to clearly illustrate what movement fits with each beat of the music. I will also need to assign symbols for specific gestures. We talked about different areas of the stage representing different themes, and perhaps each movement could

have its own position. Other running themes with potential for their own ‘space’ could be ‘existentialism’, ‘shame’, ‘love’, and ‘confusion’. Each text source could have its own space on the stage, which would perhaps offer more clarity.

It was noted that these diagrams were not about the emotional journey; rather, they are a record of positions and transitions.

Summary

The exploration of movement within *Kafka Fragments* reveals a profound intersection between vocal technique, corporeal expressivity, and theatrical abstraction. By situating Kurtág’s fragmentary musical language alongside Meyerhold’s biomechanics, this chapter has demonstrated how physical precision and rhythmic economy can illuminate the latent dramaturgy embedded in the score. The devised “language of movement” functions not as decorative choreography but as an embodied extension of Kurtág’s compositional ethos; an economy of gesture mirroring the economy of sound. In bridging bel canto’s breath-centered discipline with Meyerhold’s externalised action, the performer transcends the binary of voice and body, creating a unified expressive field where sound and motion coalesce. This synthesis not only challenges traditional operatic conventions but also affirms the potential of interdisciplinary practice to reimagine performance as a site of continuous negotiation between music, text, and physicality. Ultimately, the integration of biomechanics into *Kafka Fragments* offers a compelling model for future explorations of how abstract modernist music can be staged without recourse to narrative, privileging instead the immediacy of embodied thought and the dynamic interplay of sonic and kinetic form.

Chapter Three

Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments* and the Female Performing Body

Die Guten gehen im gleichen Schritt. Ohne von ihnen zu wissen, tanzen, tanzen, tanzen die andern um sie die Tänze der Zeit. [The good march in step. Unaware of them, the others dance, dance, dance around them in dances of time.]

This miniature aphorism of Kafka's text is what Kurtág chose to open his cycle *Kafka Fragments*. As a soprano performing this work who takes on the role of 'others', I consider the positioning of this text at the start of the song cycle to be a gesture of Kurtág passing ownership to the singer, offering freedom of interpretation of the following fragments in his signature playful manner. He is opening up the space for the performer to traverse the perspectives and roles within the piece. All of this is framed by the drum-beat march of the violin, tethering the voice to allow creativity to pass overhead throughout the piece, grounded first in stable crotchets on a middle C and then with recurring fifths throughout the piece.

Kurtág was born in Hungary in the 1920s, and his musical idiom comes from a folk tradition. There is a playfulness to much of what he writes, but it remains normative in many ways: the standard binary of singer and instrument, for instance, or the masculinity to the aesthetic, as the violin has historically been considered masculine. Furthermore, it could be argued that addressing intense emotions in a fragmented way reflects the traditional interpretation of the masculine emotional experience as detached and emotionally guarded, in many instances with jagged, hostile edges of athletic coloratura in short bursts. Playing is a theatrical tool to generate ideas as a starting point. Still, Kurtág manages to play with dark themes while skirting around the abstract, pushing the singer to their vocal limits, which, in the context of playfulness, can only be considered a fun challenge (as opposed to a puppet master making his singer dance, or, like the good violin, to the beat of a drum). This is the power Kurtág gives me as a performer, and I am considering how it feels for me to perform it: what I must be doing, thinking, and engaging with technically, what I must embody to take over it and to claim authorship of the piece as theatre, rather than simply singing the music from the page.

Within Kurtág's output of vocal writing, a large proportion of his works are written for soprano voice, most notably *The Sayings of P. Bornemisza* (1963–1968), *Fragments from the Scrapbooks of Georg Christoph Lichtenberg* (1996), and his seminal work *Kafka Fragments* (1985–1986). *Kafka Fragments* is a unique musical composition that combines Kurtág's music with texts derived from the texts, letters, and diaries of Franz Kafka. Kafka's writings often depict characters who are trapped in oppressive systems and

struggle with their own identities, as well as portraits of Kafka's own existential crises, alongside dark-humoured aphorisms and vignettes. The combination of music reflecting words presents a rich and complex exploration of themes such as alienation, existential angst, and the universal human condition. These themes can resonate with feminist and female perspectives, as they reflect the experiences of women navigating patriarchal systems and approaching language as a man-made construct, with many of the fragment movements being from Kafka's point of view in a personal dialogue with another person. From my position as a female soprano performing *Kafka Fragments*, I aim to consider some of the implications and complications of Kurtág's treatment of the female performing persona, namely that the soprano voice is best equipped for expressivity outside of the realms of conventional expectations, while also conveying musical language and text and exploring the resulting issues of gender, power dynamics, and agency.

The Female Operatic Body

In this chapter I am addressing the question: Considering the work through a feminist lens, how do Kafka's texts relate to the female performing persona? I use the term "feminist" to denote a critical movement of feminism committed to dismantling systems of gendered power and inequality. It interrogates social, cultural, and linguistic structures that sustain patriarchy and advocates for agency and equity across identities. Following hooks, feminism seeks "to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression."¹¹⁵ Butler reframes feminism as praxis, arguing that "gender is performative: not a stable identity but a series of acts."¹¹⁶ In the context of performance, this definition foregrounds embodiment and voice as sites of resistance, challenging the historical silencing embedded in what Spender calls "man-made language."¹¹⁷ This conceptual lens underpins my analysis of Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*, situating the soprano's interpretive agency within discourses of gender, power, and autonomy.

My wider engagement with this piece within my doctoral studies draws on my career as a professional opera singer to examine how approaches to performance can be built as a response to the combination of concisely fragmented music and text. Novak coins the term the 'gap' in her book *Postopera* to acknowledge the absence of connection between voice and body in opera,¹¹⁸ in which the voice is 'usually over-expressive, and the body often under-expressive'. As a performer of contemporary music, I consider this connection vitally important, especially when negotiating the effects of physical demands on the nuanced vocal technicalities of *Kafka Fragments*. Moreover, I view the work through a

¹¹⁵ hooks, b. (1984) *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press

¹¹⁶ Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge

¹¹⁷ Spender, D. (1980) *Man made language*. Rivers Oram Press/Pandora List.

¹¹⁸ Novak, J. (2015) *Postopera: Reinventing the voice-body*. Routledge.

feminist lens, addressing the similarities between the anti-capitalist narratives of the oppressed characters in Kafka and the struggle of women in patriarchal societies.

In her treatise *Man Made Language*, Spender highlights how language is gendered, with certain words and phrases carrying connotations and implications that reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes. For example, the use of masculine pronouns as the default can serve to marginalise and erase the experiences of women, reinforcing the idea that men are the norm and women are the exception. This idea is compounded across feminist literature in different forms of performance, notably in the sound poem 'Mother Lexicon' by activist, performance artist, and painter Carole Schneemann,¹¹⁹ which revolves around the fact that *he* is contained in *she* but *she* is not contained in *he*. Schneemann was insistent in her writing that she was against the word 'he' as being universal to all genders. In the same vein, Spender argues that language is not only reflective of existing power structures, but also plays a key role in maintaining and perpetuating them. Language, she claims, is a tool of social control, used to shape and constrain our thoughts and behaviours. By limiting the ways in which we can express ourselves and communicate, language can serve to reinforce existing hierarchies and power dynamics. Going further back in time, Terre Thaemlitz's performance lecture *Rosary Novena for Gender Transitioning* (2009) repositions the story of the Virgin Mary as 'a woman who sexually procreates a person of opposite gender... a tale of individual gender transformation'.¹²⁰

Despite this complicated dynamic of gendered power over time, perhaps the true universality of Kurtág's writing and Kafka's text emerges from the power held in genderlessness. This perspective shifts the focus away from the narrative of a female soprano interpreting the works of two male authors within a framework of gender bias. Instead, it emphasises the genderless power inherent in the act of taking someone's words and music and presenting them as a unified body and person on stage. In this context, Abbate critiques the tendency to categorise voice by gender or to assign a specific sex to the voice itself¹²¹. This insistence on gender categorisation can often overshadow the artistry and emotional depth that a performer brings to the work. While autoethnography cannot ignore my femaleness as a performer of this music, it is essential to recognise that my identity in performing the piece is shaped not only by my gender but also by my lifelong study of voice. This has included mastering the techniques required to sing extended vocal lines within the standardised Western style, which inherently offers a rich array of expressive qualities in performance. If we accept that music is truly

¹¹⁹ Schneemann, C. (1981) *Mother lexicon*. Fondazione Bonotto [audio]

¹²⁰ Johnson, L. and Bayley, C. (2022) *Carolee Schneeman: Body politics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 245.

¹²¹ Abbate, Carolyn. "Unsung Voices." In *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, edited by Ruth A. Solie, pp. 20–42. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993

universal, it follows that Kafka's writings articulate universal truths about the human condition, exploring themes that resonate across cultures and experiences. Similarly, Kurtág's compositions can serve to illuminate the subtle nuances hidden within each aphorism, story, and letter. By approaching my performance of *Kafka Fragments* through this lens of genderlessness, I aim to transcend traditional gender roles and expectations, allowing the music and text to speak for themselves. This approach not only empowers me as a performer but also invites the audience to engage with the work on a more profound level, free from the constraints of gendered interpretations. In doing so, I hope to create a space where the emotional and intellectual cores of Kafka's text and Kurtág's music can be fully realised, allowing for a deeper exploration of the complexities of human existence that are at the heart of both authors' works. In this way, the performance becomes a shared experience that highlights our common humanity, transcending individual identities while celebrating the rich tapestry of artistic expression.

One of the analytical threads which proved itself to be essential was to address the nuances of engaging with my femininity, as a woman and a soprano, while externalising the internal thoughts of a man with a voice that happens to be female. Here, I consider the female performer through Mulvey's concept of the male gaze:¹²²

Woman, then, stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of a woman still tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.¹²³

Even if the performer of *Kafka Fragments* illuminates the text of Kafka and the music of Kurtág, she is still not only the bearer of meaning. Considering the idea of the performer wearing a mask,¹²⁴ separating the 'self' and the 'mask' implies that her self is separated from the performance, her body separate from her performing voice. This would acknowledge the disconnection between voice and body in opera.¹²⁵

Alongside my femaleness performing this work, it is feminism which emphasises the importance of agency and self-expression for women, and in the context of performing *Kafka Fragments*, agency and expression take on a unique significance. Feminism, as the critical praxis through which gendered

¹²² Mulvey, L. (2019) *Afterimages: On cinema, women and changing time*. Reaktion Books.

¹²³ Mulvey, L. (1989) *Visual and other pleasures (language, discourse, society)*. Palgrave Macmillan.

¹²⁴ Green, L. (1997) *Music, gender, education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 21.

¹²⁵ Novak, J. (2015) *Postopera: Reinventing the voice-body*. Routledge.

power is disclosed and reconfigured, locates the performing female body not as a passive conduit of musical meaning but as a contested site of agency, difference, and world-making. In the context of Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*, the soprano's oscillation between speech and song, breath and rupture, lyric line and near-noise, articulates what Butler terms the performative production of gender: a reiterative citation of norms whose failure, slippage, or excess becomes the condition of critique and transformation (Butler 1990; 1993). The soprano, with her extended register – which I will look into more closely later – has the agency to interpret Kurtág's music and Kafka's texts in a way that reflects her own experiences and challenges societal expectations, allowing her to assert her agency and challenge traditional gender roles through her vocal expression and interpretation. The female performing persona becomes a vehicle for self-expression and empowerment, using the man-made language of music and text to convey her own unique perspective. As it is an embodied performance practice rather than a historical study, I acknowledge myself as the sole author of this intervention, therefore rendering it a gendered response. Furthermore, it is potentially an investigation into the emancipation of the immobile female body within the traditional recital format.

My femininity as both a performer and researcher is inescapable when approaching the text through a feminist lens, and it is relevant at all the developing stages of the performance piece: the initial familiarisation with the music, followed by more intense engagement with the text and carving out an interpretation, to then applying and translating that response into physical movement, and finally finessing which parts offer the best clarity for communicating with an audience in live performance. Staging song cycles has a historical importance in the development of live music-making; for example, consider different interpretations of Schumann's *Winterreise*: the theatrical and multimedia filmed version performed by Ian Bostridge¹²⁶, as well as Allan Clayton and director Jane Mitchell's 2024 stage adaptation with the Aurora Orchestra playing Hans Zender's expansive orchestration. Soprano Julia Bullock recently presented a live staging of Messiaen's *Harawi* performed by Julia Bullock at Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie in 2023, accompanied by dancers and also moving around the stage herself.

We must consider why the piece is written for the soprano register, and why this is a more successful choice than any other. Kurtág navigates the use of the extremities of the soprano fach, compared to other (potentially male) voice types, to best facilitate the exacting relationship between the structure of his music and the text as a direct reflection to identify the ultimate meaning behind it. This is particularly interesting given the text from Kafka's own diaries and letters. Despite both fundamental

¹²⁶ Franz Schubert Winterreise - Ian Bostridge and Julius Drake (Parts 1-24) mwd092000 13/9/2009. YouTube. Accessed 12/3/2025

strands of the text and music being constructed by men, the vessel in which the meaning is to be expressed is a soprano at the maximum of her vocal abilities. Spender writes, 'Language determines the limits of our world which constructs our reality'. Ironically, the inaudibility of women has historically meant that even if a woman managed to break the silence of her experience, there is no guarantee that what she is saying will be accepted or carry validity equal to that of a male voice.

In *Siren Songs*,¹²⁷ Clément categorises 19th century stereotypes of voice types which, despite fluctuation into and out of the progress of gender, are largely carried forward to today's operatic stage. The coloratura soprano is usually expected to reach the extremes of her register at the expense of the lower regions of her middle and chest voice, as carrying weight in the lower registers can compromise production at the top. Generally speaking, an extended register for a soprano, typically a coloratura, goes up to a top F, F#, or sometimes a G, which is two tones above the highest note in *Kafka Fragments*. However, this contradicts soprano victimisation and mezzo-soprano 'masculine' freedom. Traditionally, the soprano voice has been associated with femininity, purity, and innocence. Sopranos are often portrayed as delicate and ethereal, the traditional victim or innocent, often cast in roles that embody youthful innocence, such as young heroines or ingenues. On the other hand, mezzos are known for their rich, warm vocal timbre and a slightly lower range than sopranos. They are typically cast in roles that portray strong and complex female characters, such as Carmen the seductress, a freedom-fighter, or the wise mother figure. These traditional stereotypes have in turn influenced the casting and portrayals of the voice types in opera.

What Kurtág has afforded to the soprano in *Kafka Fragments* is the opportunity to transcend these traditional roles by using a mixture of extended vocal techniques in the higher and lower registers, meaning the core gender of the singer can become abstract in itself, free of any traditional expectations on the stage. This requires an almost unique vocal capability which is not often found even in contemporary opera writing – it is rare to require the projection for a bottom F of a soprano on the operatic stage, as roles with this range are basically non-existent and cannot be sorted into the traditional fach system.

¹²⁷ Clément, C. (2000) *Through Voices, History from Siren songs: Representations of gender and sexuality in opera*, ed. Mary Ann Smart, Princeton University Press. pp.17-29

The Role of the Soprano

Why is the soprano voice then chosen to portray Kafka's texts, especially when, in another context, it could be promptly disregarded or deemed invalid? The act of a female soprano performing the persona in *Kafka Fragments* can be interpreted as a subversion of traditional gender roles in music, challenging the long-standing conventions that often dictate which voices are deemed appropriate for certain types of repertoire. Historically, many genres and styles of music have been associated predominantly with male composers and male voices, leading to an ingrained perception that complex and intellectually demanding music is inherently suited to male performers. By stepping into this space and presenting Kafka's intricate narratives through a female soprano voice, the female performing persona actively contests these conventions and redefines the boundaries of musical expression. This act of performance is not merely a matter of vocal technique; it represents a deeper cultural commentary and a form of resistance against gendered expectations. The decision to use the soprano voice, often idealised for its purity and range, becomes a powerful statement in itself. The female performing persona challenges the notion that certain genres or styles are exclusive to one gender, thus reclaiming the language of music as a platform for diverse voices and perspectives. By engaging with this challenging repertoire, the soprano reclaims space within the musical canon, asserting that the female voice can articulate complex emotions and thoughts traditionally associated with male characters.

Kurtág's writing particularly highlights this subversive potential, especially in the piece 'Nichts dergleichen'. In this work, he pushes the boundaries of the soprano voice, instructing the performer to produce the 'highest tone possible' and, at the height of the drama, to convey a sense of urgency by becoming 'more and more hoarse – more excited – until the voice fails at last'. This climactic moment serves as a powerful finale for the first part, transforming the internal thoughts of a male character into an externalised expression through a female voice. This inversion not only serves to illuminate the text in a clear and expressive manner but also invites the audience to reconsider the intersections of gender and voice in the context of Kafka's work. By allowing a female voice to articulate these internal struggles, the performance becomes a site for exploring themes of vulnerability, power, and identity. The juxtaposition of a traditionally feminine voice conveying the thoughts and emotions of a male character complicates the audience's understanding of gender dynamics in both literature and music. It opens up a dialogue about the fluidity of gender roles and the ways in which art can transcend these boundaries, offering new interpretations and insights into familiar narratives.

In parallel with Kafka's texts illuminating the human condition and therefore also being universal, and with Meyerhold's biomechanics being his own method for a universal physical language, recent developments toward the understanding of music psychology have proven that music is a universal

language.¹²⁸ Music exists in every society, both with and without words. It varies more within than between societies, regularly supports certain types of behaviour, and has acoustic features that are systematically related to the goals and responses of singers and listeners. However, music is not a fixed biological response with a single prototypical adaptive function; it is produced worldwide in diverse behavioural contexts that vary in formality and religiosity. Music does appear to be tied to specific perceptual, cognitive, and affective faculties, including language (all societies put words to their songs), motor control (people in all societies dance), auditory analysis (all musical systems have signatures of tonality), and aesthetics (their melodies and rhythms are balanced between monotony and chaos). They have proven that music is a universal language, and the writings of Franz Kafka are considered to be universal in their own unique ways. Therefore, music, with its ability to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, has the power to evoke emotions and communicate messages that are universally understood. It speaks to the human experience on a fundamental level, similarly to Kafka's writings, which explore themes of alienation, existentialism, and the complexities of the human condition. His works delve into the universal aspects of human existence, tapping into the shared fears, desires, and struggles that transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries.

As a soprano performing Kafka's texts, I must take on a number of different roles within the piece in order to convey these aphorisms, diary entries, and letters. Regardless of the power imbalance between what are thus far regarded as the female voice and the male pen, what actually happens when one takes someone else's story and presents it as a performer? This is an especially delicate balance to achieve in the performance of the most personal of all the media here, the diaries, none of which Kafka wanted to be published, let alone read by anyone other than himself. Furthermore, as of 2024, the centenary year of his death, Kafka has become an unlikely celebrity on the social media platform TikTok, with the hashtag '#kafka' having 1.5 billion views, and '#letterstomilena' (referring to the letters between Kafka and Milena Jesenka) tallying at 54.6 million views. Content creators make videos containing random visuals with short quotes from the letters layered in a text format over the video, or videos of the text on the page of a book. Here, we see how popular Kafka's words are when received in tiny digestible fragments, similar in duration to Kurtág's scoring, but with the soundtrack of pop or stock music.

On the subject of this TikTok trend, an article in the *Financial Times* stated that 'readers, rappers, writers and teenagers around the globe have embraced Kafka – the word "Kafkaesque" is, like "Orwellian", ubiquitous and overused, and has slipped into other languages (*kafkask* in Norwegian, for

¹²⁸ Mehr, S. *et al.*, https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/epl/files/mehr_et_al_2019_science.pdf

example)'.¹²⁹ This medium of expression is an example of how Kafka's words have been used to concisely sum up the common understanding of, in this instance, love and the intimate connection with others, acting as a vehicle for content creators to project their own feelings publicly to the world, all in a matter of seconds. Considering Kafka's wish for all of his works to be burned upon his death, this seems like the Kafkaesque nightmare has come full circle. However, the fact that the works *were* published and resonate so profoundly across humanity implies that they offer a unique and invaluable insight into the human condition which people cannot help but see themselves in and respond with their own form of artistic expression.

Kurtág's musical response characterises the fragmented and episodic structure of the writing, mirroring the disjointed and enigmatic nature of Kafka's writing for each fragment. The aphorisms are more matter-of-fact, but the diary entries and letters are more of a complicated act to inhabit Kafka's psyche through both the text and music than simply portraying a character in an opera. This is the considerable task of taking the most intimate and private thoughts of a literary giant of the 20th century and illuminating them through Kurtág's intricate and compressed score. What is the difference between performing the text as words and Kurtág turning the text into a musical score? Complications arise when one embodies and interprets the music in a female physicality while wearing Kafka's and Kurtág's languages as a costume.

There is a clear progression from the general statements of aphorisms into the more intimate dialogues and observations, including Kurtág's choices for which extracts of Kafka's writing to set to music. From my position as the performance interpreter of the work, there is not much in the opening section of the piece which specifically requires me to speak from the perspective of the character of Kafka; there are general diary entries such as the playful tossing and turning of part I number 11, 'Slept, woke, slept, woke, miserable life', with a final, almost comical, sigh of despair on the last word, and an abrupt and jagged conclusion from the violin. Part II, which is the anomaly of the work, as it is a stand-alone song lasting seven minutes and therefore the longest fragment by far, acts as a bridge – or, in fact, the 'true path' – from the light-hearted to the intense. This movement is an homage to Pierre Boulez, perhaps Kurtág's own indication toward the dialogues of intellectual exchange present in Kafka's writing. The violin winds through long lines of chromaticism while the voice dips in and out, with matching long, held notes digging firmly into the deepest resonances of the soprano register, the lowest note being F#3. In part III, we have a confessional extract from one of Kafka's letters to Milena Jesenka:

¹²⁹ Roy, N. (2024) 'Our enduring fascination with Kafka', *Financial Times*.

I am dirty, Milena, endlessly dirty, that is why I make such fuss about cleanliness. None sing as purely as those in deepest Hell; it is their singing that we take for the singing of angels.

This is the first piece of explicit dialogue presented in the piece, therefore presenting the problem of how to characterise the voice of Kafka through myself as a female performing persona. Kurtág sets the tessitura of this movement fairly low, only reaching an E5 and going down to a pianissimo F3. The quavers rock asymmetrically in parallel with the violin, suggesting the presence of Milena; Kafka was deeply in love with her, writing her over 1,920 letters despite her being (unhappily) married to another man. With this low tessitura in mind, it offers the abstract idea that the voice could be genderless, with a range like that achievable to a broader range of vocal capabilities – this is not a moment for the soprano to show off resonances above the stave.

In addition to my own interpretation of the music and physical responses, there are a number of instances in the score which imply that Kurtág has imagined some elements of how the singer might present certain fragments physically. In part I number 4, 'Ruhelos', approximately only two minutes into the cycle, Kurtág offers staging instructions for the soprano: 'The piece should be a kind of pantomime. The singer follows the acrobatics and the rage of the violinist with increasing tension, excitement, moreover fear, until her voice also fails in the end'. While these instructions are not specifically prescriptive, there is the implication that the singer should be moving about the stage. In number 19 of the same part, 'Nichts Dergelichen', towards the end of the manic song the singer is instructed: 'The lips move here faster and faster but without producing a sound'. The fully realised stage instructions come in Part III number 12, 'Szene in der Elektrischen', where Kurtág offers a graphic drawing of the exact positions in which he would like the musicians to appear on stage (presuming the soprano to be female and the violinist to be male).

Recurring themes of gender in Kafka's text indicate the fluidity of gender in Kafka's world, suggesting that societal norms and expectations surrounding gender identity are not as fixed as they may appear. Judith Butler, in their seminal work *Gender Trouble*, argues that 'gender is not written on the body as the torturing instrument of writing in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" inscribes itself unintelligibly on the flesh of the accused'. This statement encapsulates Butler's view that gender is not an inherent quality, but rather a performative function of the body, shaped by cultural and social contexts. In this light, Butler draws a parallel with Kafka's depiction of a masochistic punishing machine in 'In the Penal Colony', where the condemned person is subjected to a brutal form of punishment without being fully aware of their crime. This imagery serves as a powerful metaphor for gender attribution,

illustrating how individuals can be subjected to rigid identities that are imposed upon them without their consent or understanding.

This ideological premise (that gender is a complex interplay of social constructs rather than mere physiological attributes) presents unique challenges for performers such as myself, particularly as a larger-voiced singer with access to strength in both my lower and higher registers interpreting Kurtág's work. The nuances of vocal timbre and range often lead to assumptions about gender roles and expectations in performance, complicating the act of self-expression within a framework heavily influenced by traditional gender norms. This is where Dame addresses the tricky concept of gender in relation to the voice, posing a thought-provoking question: 'Does the voice have a gender?' One is inclined to say that it does, as our perception of voice often aligns with preconceived notions about gender. In many cases, we can accurately discern whether a voice originates from a female or male body, which further entangles the relationship between voice, identity, and societal expectations.

However, this recognition of gendered voice does not negate the fluidity that Butler highlights; rather, it underscores the complexities involved in performance. When using my lower vocal extension, I grapple with the ways in which my vocal identity challenges traditional gender binaries. This duality allows for a rich exploration of character and meaning in performance, demonstrating the voice's ability to transcend conventional categorisations. By embracing the fluid nature of gender, I can re-interpret Kurtág's compositions through a lens that acknowledges and celebrates diversity in vocal expression. In doing so, I aim to liberate my performance from the constraints of societal expectations, allowing the music and text to resonate authentically with the audience. This journey of self-discovery, while navigating the intersections of gender and voice, becomes a vital part of my artistic expression. It invites a dialogue about how we understand identity and the ways in which art can challenge and expand our perceptions of gender. Ultimately, this exploration emphasises the importance of acknowledging the complexities of gender in both Kafka's literature and Kurtág's music, fostering a deeper appreciation for the nuances of human experience that these works embody.

In conclusion, the performance of *Kafka Fragments* by a female soprano voice presents a compelling and complex exploration of gender, power, and self-expression. The soprano's ability to access the extremities of her vocal range, beyond the traditional expectations of the fach system, allows her to transcend gender stereotypes and assert her own agency in interpreting Kafka's profound texts and Kurtág's challenging score. As a female performer, I am inescapably shaped by my own lived experiences and feminist perspective. This colours my embodied approach to the work, in which I use physical movement and gestural language to externalise the internal turmoil of Kafka's characters. Rather than simply singing the music from the page, I aim to become a vessel for the universal truths

of the human condition that resonate across Kafka's writings. By taking on the male narratives presented in the texts, I do not seek to erase my own femininity, but rather to use it as a tool for empowerment and subversion. The soprano voice becomes a means of reclaiming the 'man-made language' of music and asserting a female perspective. In doing so, I hope to challenge the traditional gender roles and power dynamics that have historically permeated the operatic stage. Ultimately, the performance of *Kafka Fragments* by a female soprano is a testament to the universality of human experience that transcends the constraints of gender. Through the synthesis of Kafka's words, Kurtág's music, and my own embodied interpretation, I seek to create a profound and multifaceted exploration of the human condition.

Conclusion

Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*, a seminal work of abstract modernist composition, is widely acknowledged as a technically demanding and vocally challenging piece for performers. The extreme range, dramatic intensity, complex rhythms, and physical stamina required of the singer have led many to conclude that a solid grounding in classical vocal technique is imperative for a successful interpretation of this demanding score. The bel canto approach is characterised by several essential elements that distinguish it from other vocal styles – including the cultivation of a smooth, seamless legato line, precise control over dynamic nuances, and the ability to execute rapid, elaborate vocal figurations with clarity and ease – and these techniques have helped me to find a grounded yet dramatic approach to learning and performing this piece. Underpinning these technical facets is a strong emphasis on efficient breath management and support, which are essential for achieving the desired smoothness, evenness, and expressive potential of the vocal tone and have strong aesthetic echoes with the melodic strategies of Kurtág's compositional approach. The focus on developing proper breath control, vocal flexibility, and tonal consistency through techniques such as vowel modification remains central to my learning approach, providing me with the necessary technical foundation to navigate the complexities of this challenging modern repertoire.

Kafka Fragments benefits significantly from being performed with physical movement rather than as a traditional recital or as a staged opera. The integration of biomechanics and bel canto technique allows for a visceral expression of abstract modernist music through my unique feminist lens. This embodiment fosters a deeper connection between the performer and the text, as the physical expression of the abstract is illuminated in a similarly abstract way and without the need for a traditional narrative. The disjointed and often surreal quality of Kafka's prose is purposefully mirrored in the fluidity and dynamism that movement brings to the performance, offering an intense immersive experience for the performer which is in turn communicated to the audience.

Additionally, the role of the female performing body in the piece offers a nuanced exploration of gender. The soprano's vocal range and physical embodiment of Kafka's male characters subvert expectations, reclaiming music as a platform for diverse voices. This performance becomes a site of empowerment, using femininity not to erase Kafka's narratives, but to deepen the complexity and emotional resonance of the work. By inhabiting these fragmented, intimate texts, the soprano bridges the gap between male and female, public and private, and performer and audience. Through this synthesis of text, music, and physicality, the soprano asserts a powerful expression of the fluidity of gender and the shared nature of human emotions, inviting a reimagining of Kafka's timeless themes of alienation, power, and vulnerability.

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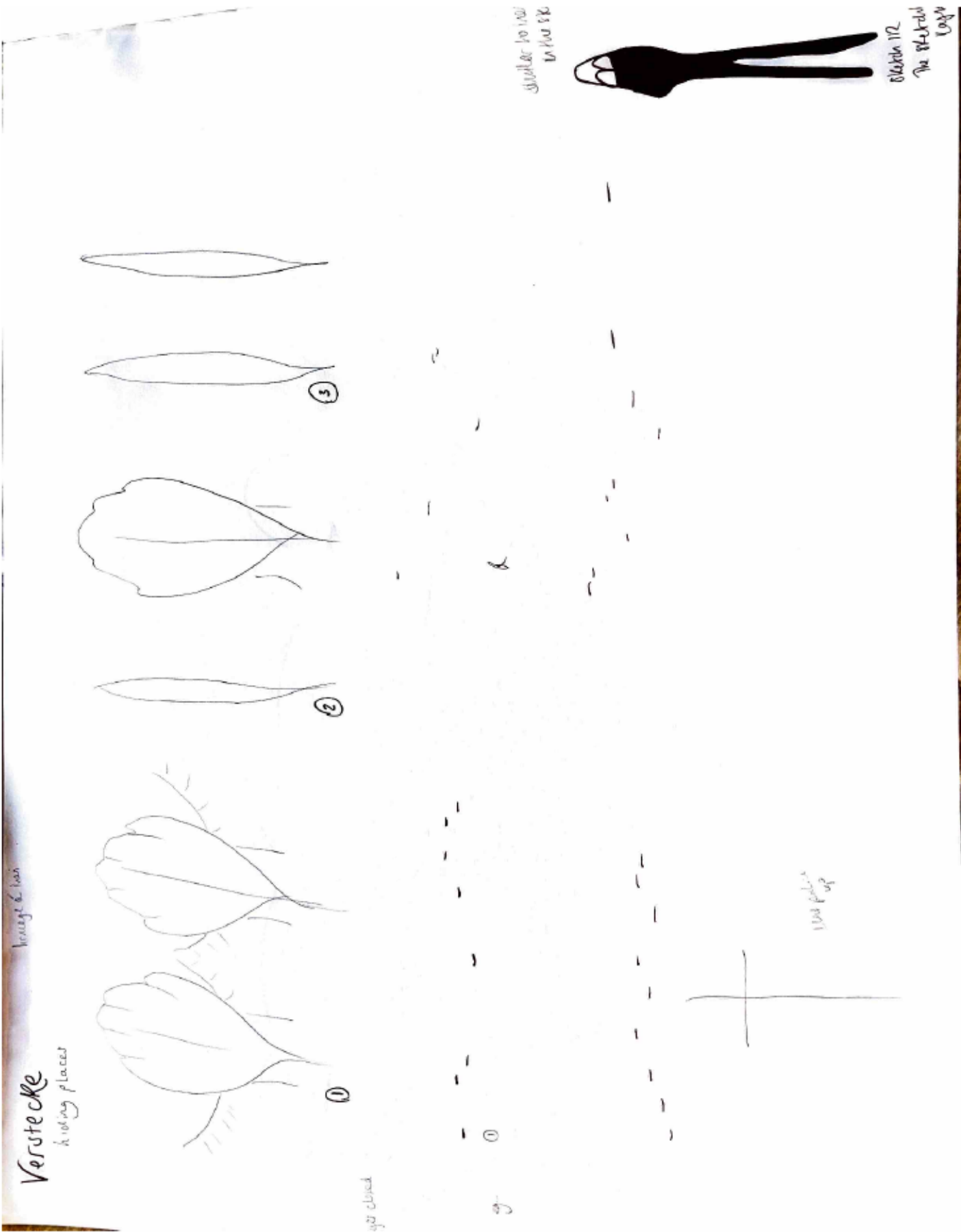
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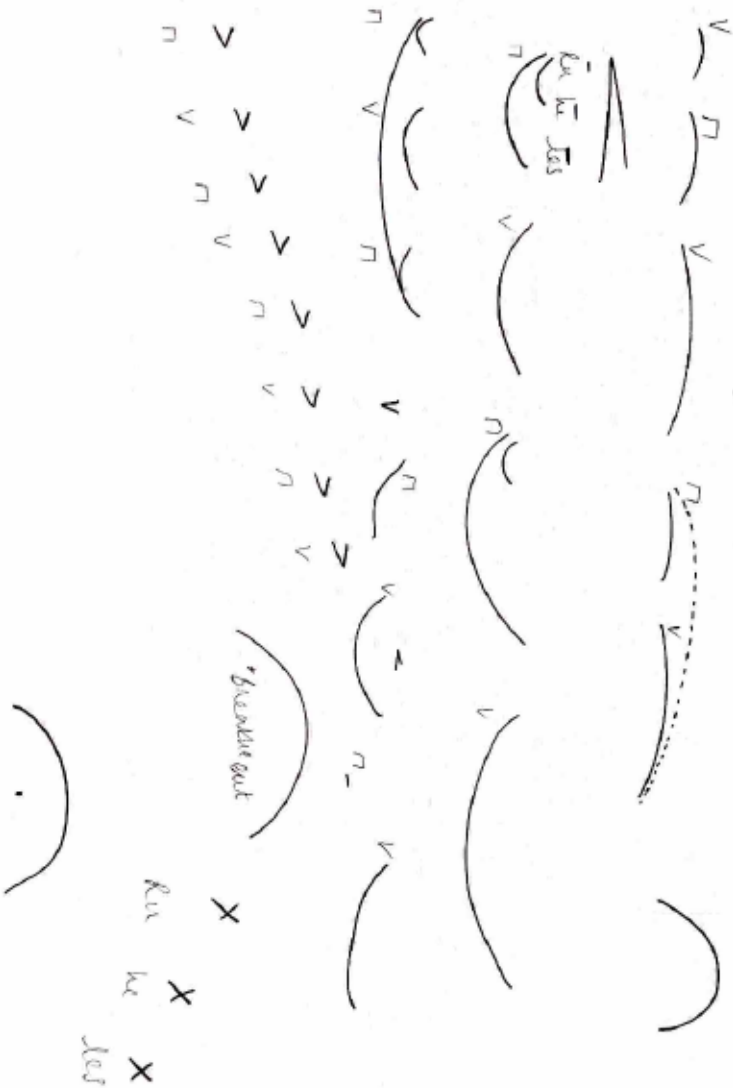
Ruined

the physical information from killing

"The area should be a kind of panorama.
The river flows by a series of ^{small} meanders
with increasing velocity, excitement, speed, power, fear,
until it reaches its goal in the end."

degradation within?

Ecology-



* 100m x 2g



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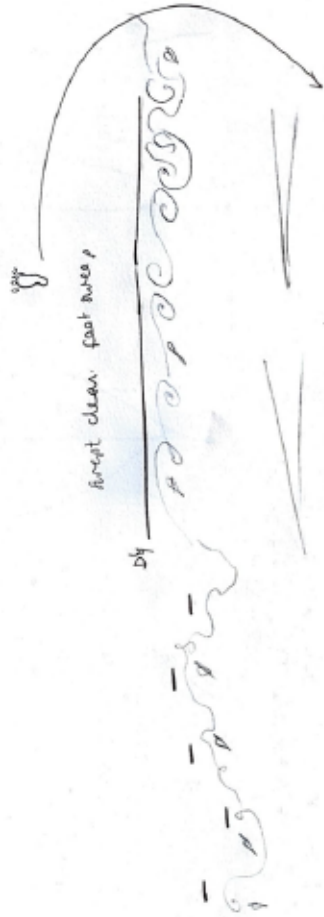


Use on weg in herbst



ind. sept. 2016

hard leaves



(visu. dynamics)



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