

# Melrose Music Society

SCOTTISH CHARITY NO. SC005891

Sunday, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2026, 3pm

## Pianists Marianna Abrahamyan and Ethan Chan celebrate György Kurtág's 100th Birthday



Domenico Scarlatti - *Sonata in F minor K 466*

György Kurtág - *Játékok Vol. III/40: Hommage à Domenico Scarlatti*

Frédéric Chopin – *Etude Op.25, No 1 “Aeolian Harp”*

György Kurtág - *Eight Piano Pieces, Op. 3*

Franz Liszt - *Hungarian Rhapsody No.7*

György Kurtág - *Játékok, Vol.I/74: Perpetuum mobile (objet trouvé)*

György Ligeti - *Etude No. 11, dedicated to Kurtág*

György Kurtág - *Szálkák, Op. 6d*

Franz Schubert - *Marche caractéristique à C Major, No 1 D.968b*

Interval

György Ligeti - *Musica Ricercata 1,2 &10*

Johann Sebastian Bach, trans. Ferruccio Busoni - *Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ*

Sofia Gubaidulina – *Chaconne*

György Kurtág - *... feuilles mortes ...*

Frédéric Chopin – *Etude Op. 25, No 12 “Ocean”*

Ludwig van Beethoven - *Sonata No. 26 in E flat major, “Les Adieux”*

György Kurtág - *...couple égyptien en route vers l'inconnu...*

## György Kurtág - born February 19<sup>th</sup>, 1926 - Just Play!

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In 1946, Kurtág enrolled at the Budapest Academy, where he became close friends with a fellow Jew from Romania, György Ligeti. They were isolated from modernist developments, even Bartók was banned under Stalinist communism. Following the 1956 uprising, Ligeti escaped to Austria, Kurtág to Paris, where the laconic music of Webern and the austere dramas of Samuel Becket inspired but simultaneously demoralised him. "I realized to the point of despair that nothing I had believed to constitute the world was true..." Working through his dejection with psychologist Marianne Stein revealed that "simplicity allows for direct, personal expression." In 1958, he, unlike Ligeti, returned to Hungary, less repressive after Stalin, to forge a unique, haunting sound-world, often as small as a grain of sand. Lines from Beckett illuminate his approach. "If you go for the universal, you get nothing; if you go for the specific, you get the universal." "There is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express." "I can't go on. I'll go on."

Whereas Kurtág's early works are tersely bleak, a new freer, ludic style suddenly emerged in the early 1970s after three years of creative block. "In my case, at least, it is the composition that sets the rules for itself, and not the composer. If I knew in what form I wanted to compose, if I knew exactly that a piece should be like this or like that, I wouldn't be able to write it. In this respect I have no technique and no knowledge. The music can only come into existence when it decides to. And then this Something is cleverer than me, and it finds its own way." One way it found was *Játékok* ('Games'), a series of piano pieces animated by the essence of play, and – I assume - informed by the spirit of Beckett's 1963 play, *Play*: "I know now, all that was just . . . play. And all this? When will all this... all this, when will all this have been... just play?" Such stuttering hesitations, pauses and silences, so characteristic of Beckett's style, can be heard often in *Játékok*. Kurtág explains, "The idea of composing 'Games' was suggested by children playing spontaneously, children for whom the piano still means a toy. They experiment with it, caress it, attack it and run their fingers over it. They pile up seemingly disconnected sounds, and if this happens to arouse their musical instinct they look consciously for some of the harmonies found by chance and keep repeating them... Pleasure in playing, the joy of movement - daring and if need be fast movement over the entire keyboard right from the first lessons instead of clumsy groping for keys and the counting of rhythms - all these rather vague ideas lay at the outset of the creation of this collection. Playing - is just playing. It requires a great deal of freedom and initiative from the performer. On no account should the written image be taken seriously but the written image must be taken extremely seriously as regards the musical process, the quality of sound and silence."

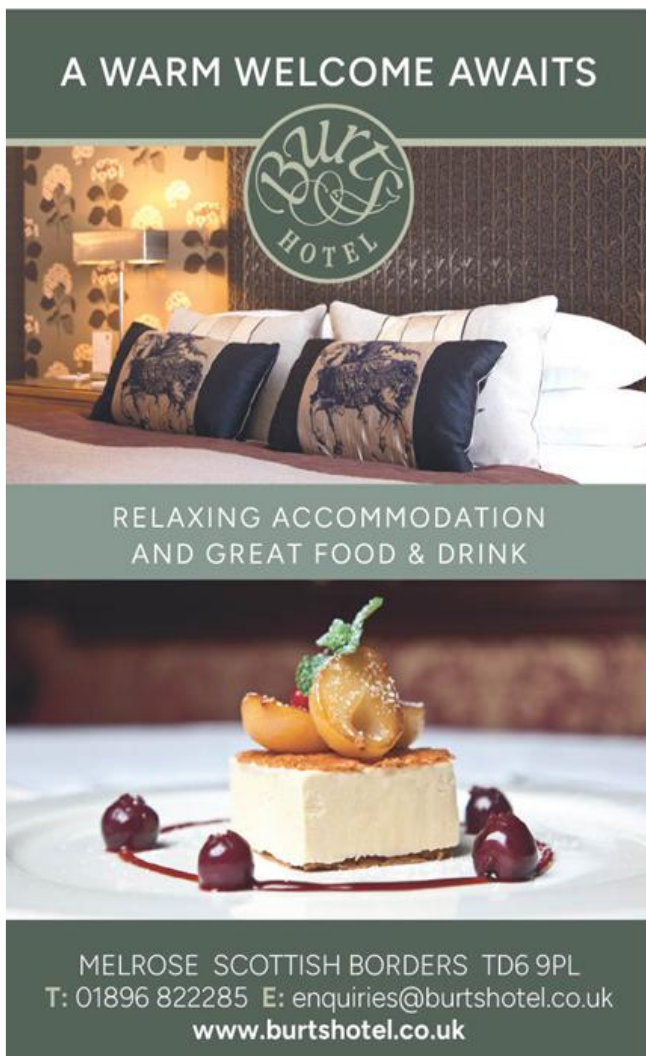
Reviewing Kurtág's recording of some *Játékok*, fittingly interspersed with his transcriptions of Bach, Arnold Whitall wrote "If any contemporary composer can persuade the musical world that compositions of between 30 seconds and four minutes in length are the natural vehicle for progressive post-tonal music, and therefore for the music of the future, that composer is György Kurtág. It's an indication of the strength

of traditional aesthetic values that we still refer to such works as 'miniatures', a label that always implies some degree of superficiality, as if a truly profound experience can only be had from unbroken structures of far greater length.” Perhaps, but most of Bach’s keyboard works are “miniature”, at least compared to *The Saint Matthew Passion*, so too all of Scarlatti’s 555 sonatas and nearly everything by Chopin. Writing this programme, though, I realised that reading my descriptions would take longer than listening to the pieces so I will leave much to your imagination, and sense of play. Most importantly, I hope Kurtág’s games are literally “refreshing”, helping you to find new nuances and inferences in the, more familiar, canonical works that he, too, loves.

**Domenico Scarlatti (1685 – 1757): *Sonata in F minor K 466***

**György Kurtág: *Játékok Vol. III/40: Hommage à Domenico Scarlatti***

Born in Naples, the fourth child of distinguished opera and liturgical composer, Alessandro Scarlatti, Domenico inherited his father’s musicality but worked on an utterly different scale. His 555 keyboard sonatas, written in Madrid where he was employed for two decades at the royal court, interject flamenco rhythms and spicy Moorish modes into their introspective, reflective melodic invention. The moody, mysterious K466 anticipates Beethoven’s “*Moonlight*” *Sonata* and the nocturnes of Field and Chopin. Kurtág’s homage distils Scarlatti’s most striking characteristics: the four-part structure (A1 B1 A2 B2), sudden changes of character, unsettlingly shifting time signatures, spiky repetitions into a striking piece less than a minute long.



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**Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849): *Étude Op.25, No 1 “Aeolian Harp”***

**György Kurtág: *Eight Piano Pieces, Op. 3***

**Franz Liszt (1811-1886): *Hungarian Rhapsody No.7***

Schumann called Chopin's *Étude* in Ab major from 1836, "a poem rather than a study", coining its nickname because of the fluttering left-hand *arpeggios* and the feathery melody floating above high them. Kurtág's *Opus 3* from 1960 is as oblique and tersely fragmentary as anything by Webern, but the juxtaposed extremes create emotional intensity, the drama arising from how each brief piece may relate to - if not a "whole", at least - other links in an evolving chain: 1) inexorable, walking energetically; 2) calm; 3) sustained; 4) gliding 5) as fast as possible; 6) solemn; 7) slow; 8) lively. Liszt's energetic, virtuosic seventh Hungarian Rhapsody, published in 1853, interweaves three themes, a popular tune of the time entitled "Chlopitzky's Song", and two passionate folk melodies, "I have no dearer guest" and "I have seen no swallow in winter".

**György Kurtág: *Játékok, Vol.I/74: Perpetuum mobile (objet trouvé)***

**György Ligeti (1923-2006): *Étude No. 11, dedicated to Kurtág***

**György Kurtág: *Szálkák, Op. 6d***

*Perpetuum mobile*, from the first volume of *Játékok*, treats the piano as a fascinating "found object" – the hands, like inquisitive children, running up and down the keyboard to discover what wondrous sounds may emerge. Ligeti's homage to his friend is marked "*En Suspens. Andante con moto*", capturing a key paradox at the heart of Kurtág's aesthetics: how can something "on hold" progress "with energy"? The answer here is by pitting six beats per bar in the right hand against four in the left hand, with irregular phrase-lengths and accents, to create an ethereal web of shifting harmonies and rhythms, which never arrive at a resolution. "Splinters" composed in 1973, originally for the Hungarian national instrument, the *cimbalom*, transfers naturally to the piano. One of Kurtág's most extended (over six minutes!) and least disparate compositions, its four movements - I *Molto agitato*, II *Sostenuto*, III *Vivo*, IV *Mesto* – gesture towards if not sonata form at least a narrative, beginning with agitated determination but ending in aching sorrow, a *finale* reminiscent, to my ears, of Mahler's *9th Symphony*.

**Franz Schubert (1797-1828): *Marche caractéristique à C Major, No 1 D.968b***

Unrecognised in his lifetime, most of his works unperformed in public, Schubert produced a constant stream of small-scale pieces for himself and his friends to play at private gatherings. This exuberant little march was probably composed early in 1826, for the strident theme, recast in 4/4 time and at a less brisk, more majestic, tempo, was developed into the *Allegro ma non troppo* section of the opening movement of his vast *9th Symphony* completed later that year (but sadly not performed for decades). Here, the catchy, jaunty tune is offset by a contrasting slower, more delicate, section in A minor, before returning with even greater vigour.

## György Ligeti: *Musica Ricercata 1,2 &10*

Although they remained unperformed until the late 1960s, Ligeti composed the eleven short pieces of his "researched music" between 1951 and 1953, while lecturing at the Budapest Academy of Music and, as he said, attempting 'to build a new music from nothing'. The thunderous first, *Sostenuto – Misurato – Prestissimo*, explores rhythm and timbre entirely on the note A until a final dramatic D. The calm second, *Mesto, rigido e cerimoniale*, is based on a plaintive alternation between E# and F# (a mere semi-tone), before the unnerving entrance of G. The tenth, *Vivace. Capriccioso*, is overtly virtuosic, and becomes increasingly daemonic with an instruction to play "as if mad". Perhaps that is how any truly creative musician would have felt in Hungary in the early 1950s.



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**Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) trans. Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924):** <sup>6</sup>

*Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ*

**Sofia Gubaidulina (1931-2025): Chaconne**

This serene prelude from the *Orgel-Büchlein* appears as No. 5 in Busoni's *Ten Chorale Preludes* (1898), one of his twenty-five volumes of Bach transcriptions for the piano. Flowing *arpeggios* in the middle register accompany the tender, mostly unadorned melody. Busoni cavalierly added four bars of his own as a coda. His best-known transcription is of the *Chaconne* from Bach's violin *partita* in D minor (we will hear the original in October). In 1962, Gubaidulina adopted and adapted its structure: instead of Bach's 64 variations on a 4-bar theme, she offers a continuous, sinuous evolving variation on an eight-bar theme, whose bell and organ pedal sonorities suggest her Orthodox faith, repressed, of course, at that time in the USSR.

**György Kurtág: Játékok, Vol.9/10 ... feuilles mortes ...**

**Frédéric Chopin: Etude Op. 25, No 12 "Ocean"**

Published in 2017, the delicate, soothing *Dead Leaves* seems as interested in the physicality of performance as the sounds: the constant slow *sopra* creates a hand ballet like fallen leaves being blown around in the wind. Inevitably, it invites comparison with two famous works with the same title: Kurtág's compatriot József Kozma's *chanson* from 1946 and Debussy's desolate late piano piece from 1913. First published in 1837, Chopin's *étude* is a series of rapidly rippling, rising and falling, semiquaver *arpeggio* patterns in a range of chord progressions within the key of C minor. The melody is played by the left hand, with sparkling surf being splashed by the right.

**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827): Sonata No. 26 in E flat major, "Les Adieux"**

*I Das Lebewohl*


*II Abwesenheit*

*III Das Wiedersehen*

Beethoven's sonata was completed on May 4, 1809 as Napoleon's army invaded Vienna. Among the aristocrats who had fled was Beethoven's sponsor and composition and piano student, Archduke Rudolf, dedicatee of not only this work, but of his "Archduke" *Piano Trio*, "Emperor" *Piano Concerto*, last violin sonata and *Missa Solemnis*. Like his "Pastorale" *Symphony*, finished the previous year, but unlike any other of Beethoven's major instrumental works, this sonata is overtly programmatic, as signalled by the titles of the movements: 'farewell', 'absence', and 'reunion'. The middle movement, in Beethoven's signature key of C minor, is especially emotional, anticipating Schumann and Brahms at their most poignant, whereas the *finale* is full of frivolity recalling Haydn at his most humorous.

**György Kurtág - ...couple égyptien en route vers l'inconnu...**

This pair of piano pieces from 2013 was inspired by a 4,000-year-old wooden statue in the Egyptian Collection of the Louvre, portraying a couple holding hands. We will never know who they were nor where they were going, but do sense they belong together, and hear their quiet footsteps in Kurtág's music, as it too wanders into the unknown.




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**Marianna Abrahamyan** began playing piano at the age of five, taught by her mother, studied at the Tchaikovsky Professional Music School for talented children and the Yerevan State Conservatoire in Armenia, and the University of Agder in Norway. In 2024, she was awarded a Doctorate of Performing Arts by the University of St Andrews on behalf of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) for her thesis on Ligeti's Piano Etudes, Trio and Concerto. She has taught on the RCS Junior Programme since 2017, and, in 2024, was appointed Lecturer in Piano. Her recent performances have included tours in France, Italy, Norway, and Argentina. She has performed in London (Wigmore Hall, the Purcell Room and St Martin-in-the-Fields), Edinburgh (Palace of Holyrood house), Perth Concert Hall, and at other venues across Great Britain. She has also broadcast for radio, including BBC Classics Unwrapped and *La Matinale de France Musique* for Radio France. She often works in a duo with Galashiels-based violinist Gina McCormack.

**Ethan Chan** was born in 2008 in Kilmarnock. He began playing the piano at the age of 7 at the Yamaha Music Point in Kilmarnock. At 11, he started studying at the RCS with Marianna. Ethan has participated in numerous orchestral works with the junior orchestras at RCS, recently performing "Symphonic Dances" from *West Side Story*. He has also played in chamber music groups, including participation in the chamber music project "Attune" by Young Sounds UK in 2024. In 2023, Ethan won the Gilbert Innes Piano Prize at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and the EMCY Prize at the 11th International Junior Piano Competition "Brin d'herbe" in Orléans, France, 2025.

## **Our Next Concert**

**Sunday, May 31st, 3pm - Concert Royal, flute, cello & harpsichord**

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### **Music for a Georgian Drawing Room**

Concert Royal, one of Britain's first "authentic instrument" ensembles, has, remarkably, retained the same personnel for fifty years. This concert on their farewell tour, is absolutely your last chance to hear them recreate the sophisticated charm of a C18th musical entertainment in which German baroque sonatas and fantasies are played alongside British folk-song arrangements, dances and character pieces.

## **Our Next Kurtág and Ligeti**

**Sunday, June 28th 3pm – The Bute Wind Quintet**

We conclude our celebration of Kurtág with his Opus 2 in a programme also including Ligeti's quirky *Six Bagatelles*, Berio's amusing set of animal impressions, *Opus Number Zoo*, and Schoenberg's Op.26 the greatest wind quintet ever composed.

## **Our Next Schubert**

**Sunday, July 19th 3pm – Simon Callaghan, piano**

One of the finest pianists of his generation, with over 50 CDs to his name, will play Schubert's magnificent, poignant last piano sonata, the epic D960, preceded by two English works from 1908: Cyril Scott's first sonata – a major influence on Stravinsky - and Rebecca Clarke's *Theme and Variations*.

## **Our Next Chopin**

**Sunday, August 16th 3pm – “It might as well be Spring”**

**Maria Waszyrowska, soprano & Harris Playfair, piano**

Chopin's rarely-heard but beautiful songs feature together with delightful melodies by Gershwin, Rodgers, Tchaikowsky, Szymanowski and Weill in an eclectic recital exploring the interplay between Broadway and Europe. We also mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bruno Walter's birth with some of his charming lieder.

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