These two Kurtág discs were released more or less simultaneously. Both are song recitals; the unusual ensemble is common to both albums but a couple of works on the Avie issue make use of a piano rather than a cimbalom, while three of the works (accounting in each case for more than half of the duration of the disc) overlap. Some of these cycles have cropped up in mixed programmes before now, but perhaps the best overview to date of Kurtág’s singular approach to songwriting is a Hungaroton disc ‘Works for Soprano’ (HCD 31821) which features the redoubtable German-born, Hungarian trained (and bred) Adrienne Csengery, who was the composer’s soprano of choice back in the 1980s (Susan Narucki namechecks her in the Avie leaflet). Her idiomatic Hungarian is obviously a big advantage on that recording which includes four of the sets that feature on the Avie disc plus a fine account of the Op 19 cycle (which is sung in Russian). Frankly however, it sounds a bit dated compared to both new discs. Kurtág is unquestionably a master, and as the last half-century or so has elapsed the passage of time has facilitated the emergence of something of a Kurtág performance tradition, something from which both singers and players on these releases have undoubtedly been able to benefit.

Kurtág is now 93; he is the king of the aphorism, and his music unquestionably demands the fullest concentration on the part of the listener. His is an art of compression and in the works spread across these two discs every second counts; every breath, sound and silence – every heartbeat. Reviewing them in tandem has been an education for me, comparable to the considerable time I spent thirty years ago getting to grips with Webern. Familiarity in this case breeds power and understanding. I started with the Op 22 cycle for voice and cimbalom. These ‘dialogues’ with oneself, their ‘calls and responses’ range from a tiny, exuberant declamation of self-frustration (No 2, Egyensúly) via a hypnotic, enigmatic repetition of a single line (No 5, Labirintus), to the fragile ethereal beauty of No 6 (Ami megmaradt) and the plodding riddle of No 7, Ars poetica – a haiku/fable which alludes to a snail ascending Mount Fuji. On the Audite disc the silken-voiced Ukrainian soprano Viktoriia Vitrenko finds life and drama in a reading which ravishes and delights, while she is accompanied by an apparently fruitier sounding cimbalom than is Susan Narucki on Avie. But with the American’s subtly shaded, more attentive focus on the sound and projection of the Hungarian language she perhaps conveys yet more breadth with the gentler instrument. Either way, both interpretations are treasurable.

In the four stanzas and six plus minutes of Kurtág’s relatively early Opus 8 Egy téli alkony emlékére (A Twilight in Winter Recollected) the intense melancholy of Pál...
Gulyás's words are initially matched with a yearning, ultimately questioning violin line and a stumbling cimbalom, while the second stanza evokes a benignly Bergian expressionism, which is radiantly conveyed by Narucki. The last two verses are more jagged and astringent, qualities that certainly don't daunt the American and which underpin the violin part until the closing phrase of the piece. The Audite recording is warmer than its Avie counterpart, and beautifully suits Vitrenko's accomplished theatrics in both the quieter music and its more violent outbursts. The instrumentalists on this disc also seem to allow Kurtág's condensed ideas a little more space. But it's not a competition, and the differences between these readings both illuminate and validate this extraordinary music.

Both discs open with one of Kurtág's best-known vocal works, the fifteen brief 'songs' of Scenes from a Novel, Op 19 to words by the Russian poetess Rimma Dalos. A double-bass is added to the mix here. Listening to these performances in close succession, the idea of Kurtág, the master of the miniature writing a full-length opera (his Fin de Partie was premiered last year to more or less unanimous acclaim) seems less improbable. Scenes from a Novel essentially incorporates the monologue of a woman who has loved and lost, but is ultimately (outwardly at least) feisty and resilient to the experience. At its centre is the histrionic seventh song, Rondo; the musical and emotional ground covered in this three minute number (an epic by Kurtág's standards) is extraordinary. I really enjoyed both these accounts of this masterpiece. First of all, the wealth of drama and colour the composer conjures in an instrumental accompaniment of just three instruments is astonishing in itself, and if the Avie disc revels in the meticulous musicality of the detail, the Audite performers are cushioned by terrific sonics which expertly amplify Viktoriia Vitrenko's raw and neurotic take on these songs. On the other hand, Susan Narucki's more refined, micro-analytical approach serves this simultaneously complex and simple music equally convincingly. One might expect the Ukranian singer perhaps to sing Russian more idiomatically but to my ears there is nothing to choose between them. In terms of this shared repertoire then, I strongly suspect ardent Kurtágophiles will want both discs.

The remaining pieces on both discs support this view. Susan Narucki provides abundantly musical accounts of Kurtág sets that have in the main been recorded before. Notable among these is his Op 20, the peculiar cycle of unaccompanied vocal fragments set to the words of Attila József. These tiny statements (they defy the appellation 'poetry') are pregnant with depth and universality, while Narucki invests these naked, improbably powerful pieces (and the brief silences that separate them) with profound tact and riveting musicality. One work that was completely new to me was the set of Inscriptions Op 25, with piano accompaniment. The first of these, Flower is a setting of a fifteenth century text which is at once almost childlike; it's delivered by Narucki as if she is projecting a rainbow of sadness. The third and final inscription incorporates words found on the grave of a young woman consumed by fever on the eve of the Second World War. It is devastating, its piano accompaniment quietly Ligetian. Narucki's instrumental collaborators are beyond superb, and the Avie sound remains consistently cool and detailed, abundantly suitable for Kurtág's elaborate creations.

An added attraction of the Audite issue is what appears to be the premiere recording of Kurtág's Op 37a, Several Movements from Georg Christoph Lichtenberg's Scrapbooks. These are settings for voice and double-bass and once again draw out Viktoria Vitrenko's latent theatricality as well as featuring a remarkable double-bass part brilliantly played by Niek de Groot. Listeners will not need a translation to be impressed by the dark humour of these miniatures. This is Kurtág in an uncharacteristically ironic vein.
The disc also features a couple of Kurtág’s purely instrumental works which provide some welcome respite from his vocal output. The early Duos Op 4 for violin and cimbalom alternate flavours of goulash spice and tartness, while in the solo cimbalom Hommage to the painter Ferenc Berényi (a 70th birthday present) he communicates a heartfelt, yet seemingly effortless profundity. Audite’s sound is bathed throughout with a cushioned warmth which perhaps surprisingly works wonders with Kurtág’s sometimes barbed, astringent music.

In conclusion, while elements of this review are necessarily comparative, I certainly don’t wish to imply that I prefer one or other of these fine discs. The repertoire is incontrovertibly fascinating, and the performances and recording in each case are first rate. Adherents of Kurtág’s powerful, unique, humane voice will need no persuasion from me to acquire both. Newcomers can rest assured that either issue will provide immense satisfaction. Hopefully it will not be too long before we have the premiere recording of Fin de Partie.
The Edge of Silence
Sorcerer from a novel, Op. 28 (1981-82) [12:27]
Seven songs for soprano and clarinet, Op. 22 (1992) [9:14]
A Twilight in Winter Reflections for soprano, violin and cimbalom, Op. 8 (1990) [6:00]


cd 852/63

Austrian-American composer is obviously a big advantage on that recording which includes four of the sets that feature as the five-disc plus a fine account of the Op. 13 cello (which is sung in Romanian). Finally, however, if it sounds a bit dated compared to both new discs Kubinski is unquestionably a master, and as the last two hours I have disposed of the passage of time has been presence of something of a musical tradition, a synthesis from which both singers and players on these discs have undoubtedly benefited.

Kubinski is now live! He is the king of the euphones, and his music makes us feel like the most sensitive and the most passionate on the part of the listener. He is an art of comprehension and the works spread across these discs every second counts! Every breath, sound and silence - every heartbreak, breaking them in one has been an education for me, comparable to the kind of music I listened to for thirty years ago, to enjoy the rich sound world conceived in this disc! (3.35 minutes) I started with the cubes Op. 22 cycle for voice and cimbalom. These 'dialogues' with smooth, well-timed and responsive range from a most evocative depiction of self-preservation (No. 1, Apanco) to a hypnotic, exotic repitition of a justifiable, yet very poetic and historical atmosphere. But the most delicate of them all is No. 5. An opus - a half-cubistic alludes to a small fishing boat, Mount Hui. On the Audite disc the All-Russia born Ukrainian soprano Vika Inarkiewicz finds the right balance between vocal and instrumental. Her technique and inspiration create a unique landscape, while she is accompanied by another prominent Russian cimbalist, Roman Isachenko, which leaves us completely breathless.

In the four stanzas and six plus minutes of Kubinski's relatively early Opera & its cello the songwriter rediscovers the core emotions of his painting and the words. To say these stanzas are a bit dated (at least for the last of the three) and the words are also very poetic and emotional, qualities that certainly do not lack the American and which enliven the final part of the 1910s, 10 years since the composition steroid 'of the second phase of the disk. The Audite recording is far more than a pure companion, and beautifully Vika Inarkiewicz's accomplished theatrics both in the words and in the most intimate outbursts. The instrumentation on this disk also seems to allow Kubinski's condensation into a little more story, but it's not a competition, and the differences between these recordings both illuminate and validate this extraordinary music.

Both discs open with a scene of Kubinski's best-known vocal works, the ' fearing brief ' on scenes from a novel, Op. 19 to words by the Russian poet Evgenii Zveletnikov. A double dose has been added to the mix here. Listening to these performances in close succession, the idea of Kubinski, the master of the miniature orchestra and a full-length opera, one in the verse was presented last year to make an impression unconsciously seems less improbable. Soveron from a novel essentially incorporates the monologue of a woman who has lived and loves, but is ultimately (slightly at first) happy and rediscovers the experience. So towards the transition to the title sequence, an opus, the musical and emotional ground covered in these three minutes and a half (as an opus for the 20th century to express the irony). I hardly knew both of these movements of this masterpiece. First of all, the worth of drama and colour the composer combines in an instrumental accomplishment of such a small orchestra is astonishing in itself, and the Audite disc records in the way the composer intended was recorded. But the closest, with an instrumental collaboration of the instrument and the voice, from a novel, it's a true harmony of two voices, and the four voices are never together so that it seems that Kubinski's transformation of piano and voice accompaniment (piano, guitar, harp) into a kind of instrumental sonata, musical and not simply Vika Inarkiewicz's raw and necesary take on these songs. On the other hand, Susan Harskamp's more refined, more analytical approach to the piece, rather than a simple song, this is no more dramatic, but much more intimate, less intimate, less intimate. It could be said that there is nothing to choose between them. In terms of this shared repertoire then, a strong suspect end 'Kubinskian' will want both discs.

The remaining pieces on both discs support this view. Susan Harskamp provides abundantly musical pieces but the best songs that have in the past been recorded before. Notable among these are No. 20, and again an echo of the 20th-century setting which is not as far from the time; and it's a pure delight to hear this joyous little work in all its glory! It is a really nice blending of voices and the cimbalom, particularly. The music is most likely to be enjoyed by the dark humor of these miniature. This is Kubinski in an enigmatic but sometimes ironic voice.

The disc also features a couple of Kubinski's latest instrumental works which provide some welcome reprieve from the vocal output. The last five songs of Op. 19 for violin and cimbalom allow a fresh variety of mood and tempo, while the side cimbalom novitii to the piano, music for clavichord (a 75th birthday present) make a welcome appearance, if anything, slightly less predictable but perfectly enjoyable. Musical sound is framed throughout with a consistent warmth which perhaps suitability works wonders with Kubinski's sometimes barbed, antinomy music! In conclusion, while none of these novitii are necessarily comparative, I certainly don't wish to imply that I prefer one or the other of these discs as a whole. The repertory is certainly fascinating, and the performances and recordings of each case are first rate. Admiration of Kubinski's powerful, unique, humane way of writing is a constant. The discs, then, should provide immense satisfaction. Hopefully it will not be too long before we have the premiere recording of Op. 20.