

***Kurtágonals (ECM New Series 2097)***

***László Hortobágyi synthesizers, computers***

***György Kurtág Jr. synthesizers***

***Miklós Lengyelfi bass, effects***

***Recorded August 2008 at the Guo Manor, Budapest***

***Produced by Hortogonals***

In the landscape of electronic music among European art circles, the name of Pierre Schaeffer (1910-1995) is a monumental landmark. A pioneer in musique concrète and its ancillary technologies, Schaeffer introduced a remarkable line-up of composers to new and exciting possibilities in audible media, not least among them Luc Ferarri, Iannis Xenakis, Jean Barraqué, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Pierre Boulez. Boulez is particularly important in the context of this album, for he would go on to found the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique, or IRCAM, where György Kurtág Jr. later studied. Boulez's rocky association with Henry led to a schism between the former's insistence on the integrity of electro-acoustic configurations over the latter's "computer music." I find this conflict to be a moot one, however, when considering that instrumental music immediately becomes "electronic" the moment it is recorded, and that electronic music becomes "acoustic" when played through speakers in any given environment. Also, much of Schaeffer's pioneering work, such as his entrancing *Symphonie pour un homme seul* (1951), was fundamentally rooted in the acoustical properties of live instruments and the human voice. Whatever the argument may boil down to, this fiercely original album happily marries the two camps into a bustling commune of shared ideas. Kurtág is joined here by two fellow Hungarians: composer László Hortobágyi, who works much of his compatriot's thematic material into the album's infrastructure, and Miklós Lengyelfi, a musician of many stripes whose rock roots bring an edgier sensibility to the underlying aesthetic. The three are known collectively as Hortogonals, and through their triangular approach they create music that is undeniably spherical.

Intraga sets the tone for the album as a whole, its varied sounds barely discernible from the surrounding haze: a bass sings at our feet, a toy piano croaks into our ears, and a wordless voice flickers at the threshold of audibility. Kurtagamelan is appropriately riddled with its titular chimes. Their echoes are electronically transformed, seeming to inject a visible murmur into every struck note. A passing swarm of insects retreats into the background. And beneath it all, a muffled drum. The bass continues its subterranean journey, marking its passage through the earth with pitfalls and sinkholes. A brief chorus of voices swells, the wind blows.

Interrogation is overlaid with a cicada-like drone and a distant wash of strings, contrasting effectively with the lovely rhythmic threads of Lux-abbysum, which put me in mind of Tomas Jirku's early click-hop experiments on the Substractif label, though the "live" touches of triangle and other percussive samples add more variation to the music's topography. Dronezone showcases some of Hortobágyi's interest in North Indian music, and Kurtaganja a bit of Lengyelfi's in the electric guitar. This and Twin PeaX form a whimsical pair, respectively characterized by less veiled beats and freer sampling. Necroga closes where the album began, its steady bass strummed like a large cosmic string boring into the center of our spines.

Although the music of Hortogonals is rich in implied silence, here it moves in a continuous stream of sound. The lack of gaps between tracks renders the titles almost arbitrary, even if they do provide the occasional clue into the goings on. The music is dark, but far from ominous, and when it is ominous it is never dark. The experienced electronic listener may not encounter much in the way of innovation in the album's sound or construction, but will nevertheless find it bears a unique compositional stamp and that sort of haggard beauty only the collaborative object possesses.