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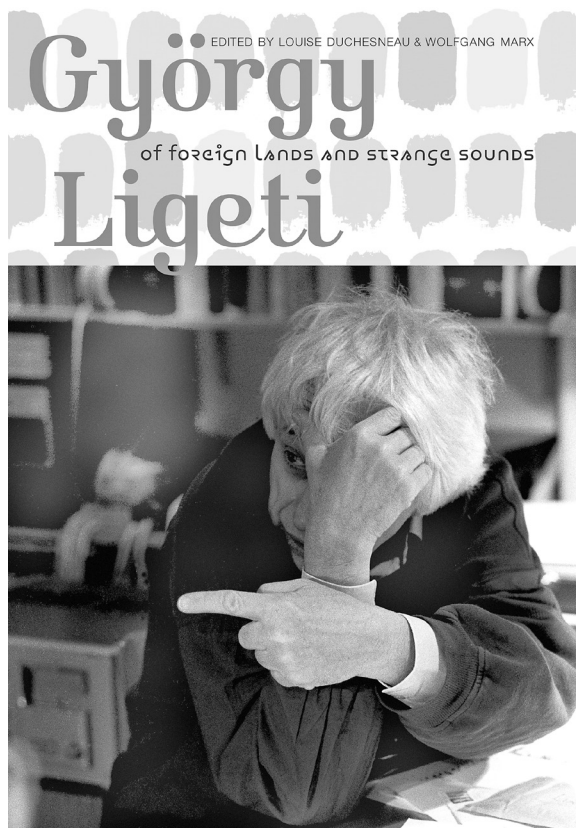
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# *György Ligeti: Of Foreign Lands and Strange Sounds*

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Review by Robert Hasegawa



As one of this volume's contributors, Jonathan Bernard, comments, "it is a well established tradition among musicologists not to take much interest in very recent music, preferring to wait until the work in question has passed into the realm of the safely historical."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, many of the first forays into the study of the music of György Ligeti (1923-2006) came not from musicologists, but from fellow composers, followed closely by music theorists and analysts. The professional alliances of these early investigators have tended to result in a relatively narrow focus on the formal aspects of Ligeti's music, sometimes to the exclusion of broader historical or aesthetic considerations.

As Bernard notes, this situation seems to be changing, and the appearance of this collection of essays edited by Louise Duchesneau (Ligeti's assistant from 1983 to 2005) and the musicologist Wolfgang Marx is a step towards a broader look at the many facets of Ligeti's long and astonishingly varied career.<sup>2</sup> Among the major figures of his generation, Ligeti exerts the strongest influence on today's young composers, due in large part to the sustained inventiveness and innovation in his late works of the 1980s and 1990s. At a time when contemporaries like Karlheinz Stockhausen

and Pierre Boulez had settled into well-established personal idioms, Ligeti continued to evolve, remaining open to new ideas even in the final years of his career.

Ligeti's profile differed from his Western European contemporaries in more ways than one. As a Jewish holocaust survivor who lost a father and brother in the concentration camps, Ligeti experienced the horrors of war firsthand. Wolfgang Marx's essay in this collection reflects on Ligeti's engagement with the idea of death in the *Requiem* (1963-1965) and *Le Grand Macabre* (1975-1977, revised in 1996), concluding that grotesque exaggeration (mixed in the opera with black-humoured farce) functions in Ligeti's music as a Brechtian "alienation effect", Ligeti's solution to addressing a subject "so horrific that it can only be approached in a surreal, sometimes even parodistic way."<sup>3</sup>

After the war, Ligeti was surrounded by the oppressive, paranoid atmosphere of Budapest under communist rule. Artistic creation and pedagogy were closely policed, and modern music was effectively banned, including even the more modernist compositions of Bartók.<sup>4</sup> Duchesneau recounts Ligeti's experience of listening to a black-market recording of Stravinsky's *Symphony in C* and *Symphony in Three Movements* on a makeshift record player in 1954-1955;<sup>5</sup> a few years earlier, he had been threatened with dismissal from his teaching position for analyzing the *Symphony of Psalms* with his students. Shortly after his flight from Hungary in 1956, Ligeti relocated to Cologne with the help of the WDR's Herbert Eimert, where he spent his first weeks devouring the WDR's library of contemporary recordings—music forbidden in Hungary, where the broadcasts of Western stations were jammed.<sup>6</sup>

His encounter in Cologne with the music of Stockhausen and Boulez was formative for Ligeti, though he remained an outsider of sorts in the Western European avant-garde. As Paul Griffiths points out in his essay, Ligeti already had a portfolio of mature tonal compositions on arriving in Cologne, unlike his

contemporaries who had begun their careers with an emphatic repudiation of the past.<sup>7</sup> In the context of his experience of authoritarian regimes, Ligeti's declared interest in hybrid systems rather than "dogmatic or puristic ones" can be seen as part of a general wariness of authoritarian systems or utopian visions.<sup>8</sup> This is reflected equally in his critique of serialism and his suspicion of the politics behind the music of Luigi Nono, whose "naïve faith in the communist idea" frustrated Ligeti.<sup>9</sup> Ligeti's hybrid systems remained open to ideas from all corners of the musical world, reaching well beyond the Western concert hall. As described by Ligeti's former student Manfred Stahnke, Ligeti's "main criterion was the 'magic' of good music whether it was simple or complex, notated or not as in jazz."<sup>10</sup>

One of the strengths of this volume is its exploration of this consistent openness in Ligeti's thought, through a series of essays examining various influences on his music. The book includes a substantial interview with ethnomusicologist Simha Arom, whose field recordings and writing on African polyrhythm and polyphony helped to shape Ligeti's late musical language. As Louise Duchesneau documents, Ligeti was a voracious listener, whose record collection (now in the archives of the Paul Sacher Stiftung) included recorded music of all genres, from contemporary Western art music to ethnomusicological recordings and jazz albums. Some of the most important turning points in Ligeti's career arose through record-store discoveries, like the LPs of Conlon Nancarrow's *Studies for Player Piano* that he found in a Paris shop.<sup>11</sup> The titles of albums, songs, or artists appear often in Ligeti's sketches as a kind of shorthand: "Dufay—Stravi—Beatles" in a sketch for the *Nonsense Madrigals* (1988-1993), or "Los Papines, Kecak, Supertramp" in his notes for the unfinished project *Alice in Wonderland*. Ligeti was also open to non-musical influences, as represented in this volume by essays on his settings of the poetry of Sándor Weores (by literary scholars Ildikó Mándi-Fazekas and Tiborc

Fazekas) and mathematician Heinz-Otto Peitgen's account of his "fractal friendship" with the composer.

Another major source for new inspirations was Ligeti's activity as a teacher. One of the high points of this volume is Manfred Stahnke's essay, "The Hamburg Composition Class," his account of Ligeti's composition classes from the mid-1970s through the late 1980s. Some of the prevailing obsessions of Ligeti's late works were fueled by compositional research pursued by his students, including Stahnke himself. Having spent a year in the United States working with Ben Johnston, a pioneer of "extended just intonation" in the lineage of Harry Partch, Stahnke was a central player in the "microtonal conspiracy" that Ligeti encouraged among his students.<sup>12</sup> In Ligeti's own music, microtonal effects played an increasing role in the 1990s and 2000s, culminating in the spectacular intonation effects of the natural horns in the *Hamburgisches Konzert* (1998-1999, revised in 2002). Another student, Puerto-Rican composer Roberto Sierra, introduced Ligeti's class in the early 1980s to Simha Arom's recordings of Banda-Linda horn orchestras—in Ligeti's music, African-inspired polyrhythms would eventually permeate works like the *Piano Études* (1985-2001) and the *Piano Concerto* (1980-1988).

Stahnke's account of the classes describes Ligeti's delight in new compositions like Gérard Grisey's *Vortex temporum* or Claude Vivier's *Lonely Child*<sup>13</sup>: "What was important to him was always what was still to be discovered, even in old, well-known areas".<sup>14</sup> Wolfgang-Andreas Schultz's essay, "The Teacher György Ligeti" presents a different perspective on the classes, often emphasizing Ligeti's particular disdain for the clichés of modernity: "This sounds like modern music!"<sup>15</sup> Ligeti was not an easygoing teacher, nor were his classes free of conflict. Both Stahnke and Schultz describe an "often uncomfortable tension"<sup>16</sup> in the group sessions held in his Hamburg home; the com-

poser was characteristically blunt in his aesthetic assessments and capable of making "spiteful and offending remarks," holding both himself and his students to the same uncompromising standards.<sup>17</sup> Stahnke and Schultz's recollections are particularly valuable in framing Ligeti's music within the broader context of European modernism, revealing the deep musical and ideological fault lines separating Ligeti from Nono, Xenakis, and Lachenmann (a "*Lieblingsfeind*," or "favorite enemy").

Other essays in the volume bear witness to a growing subfield in Ligeti studies, archival research and sketch study. Only in 2001 were Ligeti's sketches acquired by the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel (though sketches had circulated privately among some scholars for years). Jonathan Bernard's essay is particularly valuable for his classification of Ligeti's sketches into five types: jottings, drawings, charts, tables, and musical notation. The category of "jottings" is particularly fascinating: brief verbal notes in Ligeti's inimitable scrawl, often with incongruous lists referencing the names of composers, pieces, and musical styles and genres from around the world. Bernard translates a "particularly exuberant" example from the sketches for the *Piano Concerto*:

Presto: loud and soft. Fragmented. Nancarrow [Study] 41b dense, 'Caribbean-Bulgarian' rhythm, with Central African [rhythm], 'hyper-major' [scale], jazz-pianistic gleam and sparkle. Coda: 'Liszt' prestissimo, with infinite speed disappearing into the high register.<sup>18</sup>

These jottings seem to mark an early stage in the compositional process (though chronology is often uncertain), before the more detailed realization of forms through drawings, charts, and eventually musical notation. Bernard closes his essay with a thoughtful study of Ligeti's practice in the Kyrie of the *Requiem* (1963-1965), documenting Ligeti's balancing of quasi-serial imitation procedures with voice-leading rules and a

loose guiding principle of the even circulation of all twelve chromatic pitches.

Richard Steinitz also turns to sketch material, focusing on the “fallow period” between the première of *Le Grand Macabre* (1978) and the gradual emergence of the *Piano Concerto* and *Horn Trio* (1982). In a 1981 interview with Monika Lichtenfeld, Ligeti describes this period as one not only of personal crisis, but also of “a crisis of the whole generation to which I belong.”<sup>19</sup> Was it possible

not to go on composing in the old avant-garde manner that had become a cliché, but also not to decline into a return to earlier styles? I’ve been trying deliberately in these last years to find an answer for myself—a music that doesn’t mean regurgitating the past, including the avant-garde past.<sup>20</sup>

Through these years of crisis, Ligeti was immersed in a number of new interests that would prove to be decisive for his late style: “from medieval counterpoint to the music of central Africa, from Nancarrow’s studies for mechanical piano to molecular biology and computer-generated fractals.”<sup>21</sup>

As Steinitz recounts, Ligeti eventually emerged from this crisis by integrating these new concerns into the musical language of the *Horn Trio* and *Piano Concerto*, pieces that in the highly politicized environment of the 1980s were seen by some as “reactionary” or “backward-oriented.”<sup>22</sup> Ligeti described his goal as

trying to develop a harmony and melody which are no genuine return to tonality, which are neither tonal nor atonal but rather something else, above all in connection with a very high degree of rhythmic and metric complexity.<sup>23</sup>

Steinitz suggests the “eureka moment” that enabled Ligeti to finally complete the first three movements of the *Piano Concerto* in 1986 was the combination of polymeter with a “unique brand of multi-tonality,” allowing the differentiation of different rhythmic layers.<sup>24</sup>

As Steinitz’s article implies, an engagement with the music of the past was a sustaining element in Ligeti’s work, and several other essays in this volume take up this theme. Friedemann Sallis explores the influence on Ligeti’s music of his teacher Sándor Veress, who Ligeti describes, in the dedication of the movement “Facsar” from his *Sonata for Solo Viola* (1991-1994), as an “unjustly neglected composer.” Through an exploration of Veress’s *Billegetömuzsika*, Sallis is able to trace the palpable influence of Veress’s music on Ligeti’s early works like *Musica Ricercata* (1951-1953). The *Viola Sonata* is taken up in detail in one of the most explicitly analytical articles of the volume, Benjamin Dwyer’s exploration of “transformational ostinati” in both the *Viola Sonata* and the *Sonata for Solo Cello* (1947-1953). Dwyer observes that in addition to their shared concern with folk elements and lyricism, these works, separated by forty years, both react against orthodoxies, the earlier one looking ahead to the avant-garde, the later looking back on and leaving behind the dogmas of modernism.<sup>25</sup>

From today’s vantage point, Ligeti’s turn towards the historical in the 1980s seems less reactionary than liberating, particularly when considering such spectacular late works as the *Piano Études*, as well as the *Violin Concerto* (1989-1993), which prominently revisits an expressive, modal melody from *Musica Ricercata* in its slow second movement, “Aria, Hoquetus, Chorale.” While these works make prominent reference to past styles, they never lapse into mere postmodern pastiche—rather, the use of historical materials seems entirely consistent with Ligeti’s habitual openness to diverse influences, from both within and outside the world of music. With the broad yet detailed picture that it provides of Ligeti’s many influences, Duchesneau and Marx’s book is a welcome addition to the literature on a composer who leaves behind one of the most enduring creative legacies of the past century.

1. Duchesneau and Marx (ed.), 2011, p. 149.
2. Richard Steinitz's 2003 biography, *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination* (London, Faber and Faber), has also played a significant role in widening our understanding of Ligeti's creative life.
3. Duchesneau and Marx (ed.), 2011, p. 76.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 262-263.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 234.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
12. Ligeti was already acquainted with the music of Partch from a visit to California in 1972, and had returned to Hamburg with some of his recordings.
13. Duchesneau and Marx (ed.), 2011, p. 229.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 197-198.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 212.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 19.