

## Ligeti in Reigate, or : The Melancholic Pigeon

Reflections on Richard Steinitz's 'György Ligeti. Music of the Imagination'

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Today's leading composers have only an underground reputation. Where Stravinsky, Shostakovich and Britten were major figures, and, if not exactly part of popular culture, widely known as important representatives of their art, there is hardly a name now that meets with anything like the same recognition. Drop a significant contemporary work into casual conversation - Ligeti's *Études* anyone? - and you might as well be talking about the wilder shores of particle physics (except that everyone these days knows all about Higgs bosons).

What's the problem? At the extreme of musical modernism, language and structure have become so complex that the music appeals almost exclusively to the intellect. As the musicologist Deryck Cooke once put it, it's as if contemporary literature had taken *Finnegans Wake* as its starting point (though without, he might have added, the sense of humour). At the other extreme, some composers have reacted by writing music of such simplicity that it verges on the simple minded (as if their starting point had been Malevich's *White on White* paintings, though without the subtlety). The extent of the divide has only served to alienate audiences.

In an interview a few years ago I suggested that no one would notice if composers went on strike; quite a few would positively rejoice - an unduly pessimistic point of view that was nevertheless endorsed when the *Daily Telegraph* reprinted it with evident approval. There are a number of journalists who pride themselves on their hostility to contemporary music, writing about it in the knockabout way that, long ago, used to be reserved for modern art. Their attitude is a thoroughly philistine one, but they do have a point. It's nearly a hundred years since the language of music (Western art music, that is) underwent a profound change, and left the vernacular behind. By no means all composers followed the path initiated by Schoenberg : but virtually no composer of any importance has been untouched, and the unfortunate (and of course unintentional) consequence is that a large proportion of the audience for music has become disengaged.

There is of course a substantial middle ground. But clinging to the middle ground is not necessarily the way to win over an audience, and in this country at least the musical mainstream of the last twenty five or so years (Britten's death in 1976 is an appropriate milestone) has won only a grudging acceptance. Few pieces have entered the repertoire; commissions are still willingly offered, but it's a standing joke in the profession (or would be if it were not so true) that anyone can get a first performance : it's the second performance that counts.

One reason, and not a superficial one, for the rather lowly profile of the contemporary composer is that there is so much music around to compete with, and no need to have to confront new music if you don't want to (in the past music simply was new music). In an age of mass media, anything that sells in small quantities tends to be regarded with disdain. Some years ago the television showing of Judith Weir's opera *Blond Ekbert* attracted what was derided as one of the smallest TV audiences ever, around 200,000. That such an audience would have filled an opera house for a run of several months was irrelevant : if the audience is not numbered in millions you're a failure, seems to be the message. Classical music, always a minority art form, is marginalised as a result of this obsession with appealing to the mass.

So what standing does a major composer like Ligeti have? Most thinking musicians would rate him as without a doubt one of the most significant living composers, along with Boulez, Stockhausen, Berio, Kagel, Henze and Kurtág (to name only his more or less exact contemporaries). But none of these are

remotely household names, with the possible exception of Stockhausen (known, if for nothing else, for featuring on the cover of *Sergeant Pepper*) and to a lesser extent Boulez. Yet Ligeti too became, for a while, something of a cult figure when in 1967 Kubrick used his music (without permission) in *2001*. So his unique soundworld does have impinged on a wider public, although few who know the movie soundtrack are likely to be aware of Ligeti's prior or subsequent career, with its unusual trajectory.

György Ligeti was born in 1923 in what was then Romanian Transylvania : his family were Hungarian Jews but they remained in Romania until, in 1940, their part of the country was forcibly returned to Hungary. Ligeti was remarkably lucky to survive the war unscathed; his parents, his younger brother, and his aunt and uncle were all taken to Auschwitz. Only his mother, a doctor, survived. Although his family was not especially musical, he had shown an early aptitude for music, without having the firm ambition to become a composer. As a Jew he was unable to follow his preferred study of mathematics and physics, and so he turned instead to music, at the University of Kolozsvár (formerly, and in 1945 to become again, Cluj). In 1944, his third year of study, he was forced to join a Jewish labour battalion, but the relatively short Nazi occupation of Hungary meant that he escaped the fate of the rest of his family.

After the war, although officially Romanian, he was able to enter the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest, at the same time as György Kurtág. The communist rule in Hungary meant that he was virtually isolated from new music in the West; even some of Bartok's more advanced music was frowned upon. Like all the Academy students, Ligeti devoted much time to the study of Romanian and Hungarian folk music (the course had been instituted by Kodály). This, and his personal discovery of sixteenth century polyphony, became the foundation of his compositional outlook, but for a long time his music remained relatively conservative; anything more adventurous had to be hidden from the authorities.

In 1952 he went on a group holiday to the Baltic, which was closely supervised by the secret police. A visit to East Berlin gave him an unexpected chance to escape to West Berlin, but he couldn't nerve himself to make the attempt. Had he done so, he would have made for England, where he had an uncle, a mechanical engineer, in Reigate. Here - unless he had chanced to meet the embryo Manchester group of Birtwistle, Goehr and Maxwell Davies - he would have encountered a much more conservative musical climate than the one he eventually emerged into. It's an intriguing thought - Ligeti, the Cheltenham Symphonist; or not a composer at all; or, in his own words, 'I would have been part of swinging London!'

Instead he returned to Hungary. By his early thirties he had amassed a respectable body of work, but nothing that would have led anyone to believe that he might become a major figure. Elliott Carter and Michael Tippett were similar late developers - in fact later, in both cases - but they were never subjected to the repressive strictures of cultural orthodoxy that held Ligeti back, and one can clearly sense in this 'early' music - at least those pieces that have survived and that he has subsequently allowed out - a composer pressing against restraint.

With the freedoms that began to emerge in Hungary in 1955 he began to experiment openly, dabbling with serialism, and starting to discover the cluster-textures that would soon become his trademark. But before he could develop any of these more radical ideas, the incipient Hungarian revolution was brutally crushed. In December 1956 he joined the two hundred thousand refugees who escaped across the border with Austria. For Ligeti, in Richard Steinitz's words, 'Morning had come. Prehistory had ended.'

The musical world which he was to join, and initially enthusiastically embrace, was one of unabashed modernism. Many of the post-war generation of composers, primarily in Germany, France and Italy, had deliberately turned their backs on the immediate past and embraced what amounted to a new musical orthodoxy. Adopting Webern as their patron saint they took to extremes the serial principles

developed by him on a relatively small scale, and proceeded to apply them to everything. Pitch, dynamics, rhythm and structure were, in the most rigorous examples of the genre, all pre-determined. Yet at the same time as these new disciplines came into play, there was an enormous sense of liberation, and the perception that anything was possible. So along with music of extreme complexity and rigidity came, paradoxically, its opposites : graphic notation (simplistically, pictures to improvise music to), space-time notation (placing given notes according to their spacing rather than rhythmic value), aleatoric music (literally music created by the throw of a dice - but more usually, by chance operations, or by the free choice of alternative paths), and electronic music - using both existing, transformed sounds, and synthesised sound. The high temple of modernism was Darmstadt, where, since 1946, the annual Ferienkürse für neuen Musik had taken place.

All these elements of new music had their adherents, and, predictably, dogmas and factions soon arose (for instance, in the case of electronic music, between Pierre Schaeffer, originator of *musique concrète*, who insisted that only pre-recorded sound should be the source, and Karlheinz Stockhausen, who found this impossibly limiting). The arrival at Darmstadt, in 1958, of the anarchic John Cage added an extra dimension to these factions. But until the 1960s, everyone was pulling in more or less the same direction.

Once he had got over the thrill of such potential freedom, Ligeti soon saw the inherent contradiction in trying to impose new rules. A composer who had escaped communist authoritarianism was hardly likely to submit to a new diktat. Even as early as 1957, in his analysis of Boulez's formidably rigorous *Structures*, he felt constrained to write, 'You stand before a row of automata, and are free to choose which one to throw into; but at the same time you are compelled to choose one of them. You build your own prison as you please, and once safely inside you are again free to do as you please. Not wholly free then, but also not totally compelled . . . choice and mechanism are united in the process of choosing one's mechanism.'

Ligeti's initial experiments in this brave new world were in the field of electronic music. His first orchestral work utilising the new techniques he had acquired since arriving in the West was not heard until 1960. *Apparitions*, first performed under the auspices of the International Society for Contemporary Music in Cologne (where Ligeti was living at the time) created a scandal, but was also a sensational success. What was striking about *Apparitions*, and even more so *Atmosphères*, premiered in 1961, was the extraordinary subtlety and sophistication of the sound world. The audible content of most of the avant-garde repertoire was gestural - however tightly-controlled the structure, there was no way that the ear could grasp the complexity of what was going on. So that, with the exception of works like Stockhausen's *Gruppen* of 1958, whose impact was as much visceral as intellectual, there was a sterility in the content of the music that has long since relegated much of it to something of a historical dustbin.

The remarkable results that Ligeti achieved were, although in some respects simple and dramatic, obtained by extreme attention to detail, everything becoming subservient to the overall effect : the texture of the music is the music itself. As Richard Steinitz puts it, 'the microscopic activity of each player's part is mapped out with immense care; but instead of single lines we hear only the homogeneity of the whole. Sometimes the resultant cloud hangs motionless; elsewhere it trembles with energy, buzzing like a beehive.' Writing specifically about *Atmosphères* he says, 'Identifiable melodies and rhythms never emerge from its gaseous clouds. But the empty vessel never stagnates. As in Debussy, pitch, timbre and texture fuse together, animating the space.'

Such descriptions are no substitute for hearing the music - and fortunately nearly all of Ligeti's output is available on CD - but they do convey something of the effect of these dense masses of sound, at times almost frighteningly intense, at others remote and otherworldly. Ligeti's magisterial, numinous scores are not quite like anything else, and though their outward form was soon imitated and became almost a cliché of contemporary music - while Ligeti himself had already taken a different direction -

they stand as a benchmark in the history of postwar European music.

Ligeti quickly absorbed what he wanted from his new found contemporaries, and discarded what he did not need. There were, of course, other composers who belonged to the Darmstadt avant-garde for a while, and similarly moved on : Messiaen was for a while a leading figure, but although he produced a number of influential serial works in the late 1940s, his personality was far too big to be contained within these parameters; Xenakis's texture pieces, which Ligeti called 'the destruction of the individuality of voices', anticipated Ligeti in their complete disregard of serial principles, and he remained at a tangent to his contemporaries. Berio soon found Darmstadt altogether too serious; while Henze quickly disassociated himself, although his political concerns in the 1960s led him back to some extent towards the avant-garde. In Poland, the comparative cultural freedom of Gomułka's régime led to the establishment of the Warsaw Autumn Festival and the arrival on the scene of three major composers : Lutosławski remained a thoughtful and innovative conservative to the end; Górecki's style of monumental simplicity soon moved from gesture to an extreme embrace of tonality; Penderecki, the sensation of the early 1960s, with his violently expressionistic broad-brush textures, eventually retreated into a neo-romanticism which he still practises with gruesome results.

This postcard-sized summary of musical developments does little justice to the intricate paths that new music has followed over the past sixty years, and ignores the many cul de sacs that were eagerly entered. Ligeti's own route through the maze is no easier to outline : to some extent this is because he was and remains at heart something of an anarchist, and in the 1960s was encouraged - to quote Richard Steinitz again, by '[the] resurgence of Dadaistic, anti-art tendencies that seemed to remove any obligation to preserve conventional logic and which Ligeti, with his natural impishness, love of the absurd and self-mocking wit, was more than ready to share.' So while the thread of his textural pieces continued - notably in *Lontano* (1967) and *Melodien* (1971), both of which evidence an increasing emphasis on consonant harmony and embryonic melody - and was finally put to rest in *San Francisco Polyphony* (1974), there was also the surreal experimentation of the theatre pieces *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures* (1962-5) and the manifestly anti-concerto Cello Concerto of 1967. The most substantial achievement of what is essentially Ligeti's 'early' period was the formidable *Requiem* (1963-5), a fusion of all that he had achieved to date, and the major landmark before the opera *Le Grand Macabre*, first performed in 1978, but commissioned as early as 1965.

Meanwhile Ligeti had attained fame outside the small world of contemporary music. Towards the end of 1967 he learned to his astonishment that Stanley Kubrick had used large parts of *Atmosphères*, the *Requiem* and the choral *Lux aeterna* in the soundtrack of *2001 - A Space Odyssey* - most extensively during the film's final, wordless 20 minute sequence. The story of Ligeti's battle with MGM, a six-year struggle ending with his receiving a humiliating \$2500, is bizarre enough for an opera plot. Ligeti showed little resentment - he admired the film, and even became friends with Kubrick, who used his music again (and paid for it) in *The Shining* and *Eyes Wide Shut*.

The bizarre opera that he actually wrote, *Le Grand Macabre* (most of its composition took place between 1974 and 1977) was a stylistic turning point. Based on *La Balade du Grand Macabre* by the Flemish playwright Michel de Ghelderode (1892-1962) its Breughel-inspired absurdist apocalyptic vision was an ideal vehicle for Ligeti's unconventional approach to opera, which he conceived not just as 'anti-opera' but also as 'anti-anti-opera', the two antis cancelling each other out. Typical of the concept was that the libretto was written by Ligeti's collaborator Michael Meschke in German prose (the original is in French), turned into verse by Ligeti, and then translated into Swedish (the opera was premiered in Stockholm) by Meschke. Needless to say Ligeti now prefers the English version.

*Le Grand Macabre* has, since 1978, had nearly thirty productions, a remarkable achievement for a contemporary opera. However few of them have come near to Ligeti's ideal, most notoriously Peter Sellars' 1997 production for Salzburg (intended also for the Royal Opera House in London in 1999, but cancelled owing to the debacle of the reopening of the house), which Ligeti has disowned. But to

be fair, the opera's mixture of parody and slapstick, seriousness and crudity makes it virtually unstageable unless the producer has total sympathy with the composer's intentions - an asset that is not in the repertoire of a great many producers.

For Ligeti the main consequence of the opera was a broadening of his language in quite unexpected directions. He did not so much return to his roots, although the rhythmic influence of Hungarian folk music became important, as develop the melodic and harmonic aspects of his music which had always been latent. For four years after completing the opera he produced virtually no new work - although he worked on hundreds of abandoned sketches - until the appearance of his Horn Trio in 1982 took everyone, not least the avant-garde, by surprise. Ligeti's own words describe how the work came about : 'In 1982 I decided to stop playing the "crisis" game. It goes without saying that I am always - subconsciously - a creature of fashion; hence the half ironic, half deeply serious (4th movement!) conservative/postmodern Trio for Violin, Horn and Piano, in which I used a false quotation from Beethoven's "Les adieux" Sonata as a germinal motive and as an "Hommage à Brahms". The traditional forms of all four movements are obvious - and I quoted these formal patterns as a sort of rebellion against the established conventions of the avant-garde. Yet my protest, my desire to be "different" was not aimed at the slogans of "new simplicity", "Minimalism", or "neo-Expressionism" (the Trio is expressive, but not expressionistic). The Trio cannot be pigeon-holed into any neat stylistic category; it has odd angles and trick floors that do not fit in anywhere.'

Although the language of the work is considerably more 'accessible' than earlier Ligeti, the innocent listener shouldn't expect an easy ride : the Horn Trio is tough going, although immensely rewarding. It was succeeded by a Piano Concerto, which took Ligeti eight years to bring to completion (he made twenty one attempts at the first page alone!); a Violin Concerto, first performed as a three movement work, then revised with a new first movement and two additional movements; and most recently a Horn Concerto, in which he developed even further the 'natural' tuning of the horn that he had exploited in the Trio : it was first performed in 2001, but withdrawn for further revision. 'I am not in favour of this situation', he wrote, 'but I compose very slowly, destroying ten or twenty attempts before attaining the final score. Despite the pressure of scheduled future performances, the creation of art is not an everyday task and I must achieve, without compromise, the end result which is my imagined ideal.'

This painstaking process of composition, particularly evident in the production of his more recent major works, has not been so marked in respect of the work that some would regard as his magnum opus. The series of piano *Études* which Ligeti has produced since 1984 number to date eighteen, in three books, and have at times seemed to flow effortlessly from his pen (or, to be more accurate, pencil). In 1986 the First Book won the Grawemeyer Award, composing's equivalent of the Nobel Prize. Although, as always with Ligeti, there are copious sketches, and more than three times as many titles as there are pieces, the music gives the impression of being remarkably spontaneous, developing what is usually a single idea with unrestrained virtuosity. The *Études* are, in many respects, a catalogue of the composer's preoccupations.

These preoccupations are not immutable : one of Ligeti's most marked characteristics is a constant open-mindedness towards new ideas and new techniques. In the 1980s, at an age when many creators have begun to close their minds, he became aware of the work of two composers who were to be a significant influence: the maverick American Conlan Nancarrow, whose music is of such complexity that it could only be notated for player piano; and the Canadian Claude Vivier, who before his tragic death at the age of 35 had produced scores of hypnotic, ritualistic radiance. He was fascinated by the mathematics of fractals, meeting Benoit Mandelbrot for the first time in 1986. And he became increasingly open to the influence of the music of other cultures, notably the extraordinary polyphony of the Banda-Linda tribe of the Central African Republic. All of these influences have been assimilated, never used imitatively, creating what he has called 'imaginary synthetic folklore'. In one of the *Études*, for instance, Ligeti invents his 'own' version of Javanese gamelan, with an appropriately

ethnic title, 'Galamb borong'. But what sounds like authentic Javanese is in fact the Hungarian for 'melancholic pigeon'.

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Richard Steinitz's study, published to coincide with Ligeti's eightieth birthday, is likely to become the standard work on the composer. It's to be hoped that it will need a second edition, although Ligeti is not in the best of health, and his long contemplated opera on *Alice in Wonderland* seems indefinitely postponed (he long ago abandoned attempts to write an opera on *The Tempest*). Whatever else he may write, his standing is secure.

Yet to return to earlier questions, what does this mean, outside the contemporary music world? Although Ligeti has moved away from the avant-garde towards a rapprochement with the middle ground, it's likely that the radical work of the 1960s will be what he is best remembered for. For all my huge admiration for his music of the last twenty years, from which I think I have learned more than from any other living composer, I'm not sure that its subtlety and sophistication stands much chance of communicating directly with an audience in the way that the huge, monolithic sound blocks of *Atmosphères* can. It would have been very easy for Ligeti to repeat himself, but, like all great composers, he has consistently refused to do so. As he wrote, in 1996, 'After each completed composition I revise my position; I avoid stylistic clichés, and know no 'single right way'. I keep myself open to new influences, as I am excessively intellectually curious. All cultures, indeed the whole wide world is the material of art.'