

György Ligeti

(1923-2006)

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One of the world's best known living composers, György Ligeti is widely acknowledged as a musical pioneer of the late twentieth century. In response to a general stylistic crisis in the mid-century avant-garde, Ligeti forged his own musical alternative, based on texture and sound density, that has become one of the major influences on contemporary music. His varied output, which he began in pre-communist Hungary and continued in western Europe after the Hungarian communist revolution, is searingly intense at times and full of vivacity, humor and irony at others.

Born in 1923 to Hungarian parents in Dicsöszentmárton (now Târnarveni) in Transylvania, Romania, Ligeti and his family moved to Cluj (Kolozsvár, Klausenburg) when he was still a child. He began studying composition with Ferenc Farkas at the Cluj conservatory in 1941 and continued his studies in Budapest with Pál Kadosa. In 1943 his education was interrupted when he was sent into forced labor as a Jew for the remainder of World War II.

Ligeti survived, although the Nazi occupation destroyed his family, and after the war he resumed his studies with Farkas and Sándor Veress at the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest. He spent a year doing field research in Romanian folk music after his graduation in 1949 but returned to the Liszt Academy in 1950 as a teacher of harmony, counterpoint and formal analysis.

He remained there until he fled from Hungary after the revolution in 1956.

Before Ligeti emigrated to the West, his work was limited by political repression and censorship, which restricted access to new musical ideas and discouraged public presentation of experimental music. His publications of those years included only folksong arrangements and music based on Romanian or Hungarian folk music. His arrival in Vienna late in 1956 therefore provided him with fresh opportunities. He was introduced to key figures in the avant-garde of western European music, notably Karlheinz Stockhausen, Gottfried Michael Koenig and Herbert Eimert. Eimert invited Ligeti to join the Electronic Music Studio of Westdeutscher Rundfunk (West German Radio) in Cologne in 1957, and there Ligeti had the freedom to develop his style, consolidating musical ideas that had begun to emerge in his scores as early as the late 1940s. His electronic composition *Artikulation* (1958) and the orchestral *Apparitions* (1958-59), the first pieces in the mature style, attracted critical attention, and the premiere of *Apparitions* at the ISCM Festival in 1960 launched his international career.

The success of *Apparitions* was confirmed by *Atmosphères* (1961) and the organ work *Volumina* (1961-62), making clear that Ligeti was forging for Western music a powerful alternative to post-Webern serialism. A key feature of his style was the use of extraordinarily dense polyphony, which he called "micropolyphony" -- complexes of musical color and texture so rich and intense that they virtually dissolved the distinctions of melody, harmony and rhythm. At the same time, Ligeti experimented with a coloristic language that was no less polyphonic but was built on the kaleidoscopic use of articulate speech sounds and inflections, as heard in *Adventures* (1962) and *Nouvelles Aventures* (1962-65). His music throughout the 1960s relied on one or both of these contrasting techniques. In the later 60s Ligeti injected a renewed contrapuntal complexity into his work, beginning with *Requiem* (1963-65) and *Lux aeterna* (1966). *Requiem* made a powerful impression at its Stockholm premiere in 1965, and it went on to win the Bonn Beethoven Prize in 1967. *The Cello Concerto* (1966) is closely related to *Lux aeterna* (itself a reflection of *Requiem*) in sound and design -- a combination of dazzling intricacy and the most lucid of musical images. Two years after its premiere, *Lux aeterna* -- along with *Atmosphères* and *Requiem* -- reached a mass audience when an excerpt from the score was used on the soundtrack and the best-selling soundtrack recording of the Stanley Kubrick film 2001: A Space Odyssey.

In the 1970s, Ligeti's writing became more transparent, even melodic, though in a highly personal, elusive manner. The flickering melodic shapes of *Melodien* (1971) seem to be a step ahead of the listener's ear, and, in later works, he transforms the idea of melody and harmonic structure through the use of micro-intervals and deviations from the tempered scale.

As early as *Ramifications* (1968-69), Ligeti wrote for two string ensembles that had been tuned a quarter-tone apart.

Wit and satire color the composer's later work as well, occasionally with scathing results. The work 0'00", perhaps the shortest known composition, pokes fun at John Cage's 4'33". In a similar vein, *The Future of Music* (1961), for non-speaking lecturer and audience, ridicules the idea of performance art and, at the same time, questions the nature of musical communication. The opera *Le Grand Macabre* (S2K 62312), premiered in Stockholm in 1978, is suffused with dark comedy, though in general the opera relates an ominous tale.

Ligeti's ever-evolving style shifted again in the 1980s, when he left behind the static structures of his earlier works and began working with dynamic polyrhythmic techniques. *The Piano Concerto* (1985-88) is typical of this period -- the composer himself considers it his most complex and difficult score, but it immediately disarms the listener.

After 1956 Ligeti lived in Germany and then Austria, where he became a citizen in 1967. For many years he was a visiting professor of composition at the Stockholm Academy of Music, and from 1973 until 1989 he served as professor of composition at the Hamburg Music Academy. In 1972 he spent a year as a visiting professor and composer-in-residence at Stanford University.

The composer was awarded the German decoration "Pour le mérit" and the Bach Prize of the City of Hamburg in 1975. In 1986 he received the Grawemeyer Prize, and in 1996 he was awarded the Music Prize of the International Music Council.