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A Guided Tour
through the Œuvre
of György Ligeti



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Ligeti Labyrinth

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Introduction

György Ligeti (1923–2006), one of the most original and influential composers of the second half of the 20th century, was born in Transylvania and studied in Kolozsvár (today Cluj-Napoca) and Budapest. In 1956, however, he left Hungary, settled in Vienna, and soon gained recognition and respect as a composer in the most important international laboratories for new music. His work was strongly influenced at first by the legacy of Bartók and Kodály, but even in the early 1950s – despite the isolation and cultural repression that prevailed in Hungary – he took an intense interest in contemporary Western European trends and began to distance himself from the Hungarian mainstream. From 1957 onwards, Ligeti worked in Cologne, Darmstadt and other centres of new music, where he mastered the techniques and the aesthetic of the musical avant-garde with astonishing rapidity. In the mid-1970s, he began turning away from the avant-garde, which he felt was becoming too academic. His opera *Le Grand Macabre*, premiered in 1978, contains elements of pop art. Ligeti's works from the 1980s and 1990s reveal a stylistic expansion, blending highly diverse influences into compositions with a sound that is entirely their own. These changes of style do not prevent Ligeti's œuvre from forming a unity; his artistic habitus is characterised by a restless urge to explore, by a need to overstep boundaries, and by an affinity for the absurd, grotesque, fantastic and illusory, as well as by a striving for technical perfection.

Ligeti was among the few 20th-century composers whose work was, and is, received with enthusiasm outside specialist musical circles. Since the turn of the millennium, he has been one of the most-played classical composers of his generation. His pieces are not only performed in concert halls and opera houses around the world; in many places, they have also become part of the higher education in music. Ligeti's outstanding position as a composer is reflected not least in the fact that a complete edition of his works appeared on CD already during his lifetime, and there have since been numerous other recordings. Many contemporary composers find inspiration and points of reference in his music.

The exhibition organised for Ligeti's centenary by the Budapest Museum of Music History and the Basel Music Museum provides in nine themed chapters insight into the composer's ideas, creative process and achievements. Chapter 1 underlines the central significance of dreams, fantasies and labyrinths in Ligeti's creative world. Already as a boy, he invented his own imaginary country, which he called "Kylwiria", and went on to draw maps of it, create detailed descriptions of its social system, its deserts and rivers, and

the geological structure of its mountains, and even work out a grammar of the Kylwirian language. Chapter 2 gives an introduction to the technique he labelled micropolyphony, a hallmark of Ligeti's style in the 1960s. Chapter 3 focuses on the composer's brief but consequential foray into the domain of electronic music. Chapter 4 deals with *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures*, two pieces based on phonetically "composed" texts in an invented language. These semantically incomprehensible "texts" convey emotional states, rendered directly perceptible by the music, and from which Ligeti constructs imaginary stories. Alongside these two emblematic pieces, chapter 4 also investigates the settings of nonsense texts in *Nonsense Madrigals* and *Síppal, dobbal, nádibegeedűvel* (With Pipes, Drums, Fiddles). Chapters 5 to 8 focus on some essential components of Ligeti's style in the 1980s and 1990s, and the factors that prompted them: the influence of chaos theory, fractal geometry, and mathematical and scientific concepts in general; polymeter and polyrhythm; the "hybrid" tone system and the harmonic world created through the combination of various non-tempered tonal systems; and the integration of elements from the musical culture of various European and non-European peoples. Finally, chapter 9 describes the origin of Ligeti's sole opera, *Le Grand Macabre*, and highlights key moments in its performance history. Various types of documents are presented throughout the chapters: sketches, manuscripts, programmes, reviews, photos, letters and other objects, illustrating both the diversity of Ligeti's work and that of the Ligeti collection kept by the Paul Sacher Foundation.

The exhibition cannot, of course, pretend to document György Ligeti's work in complete detail. Rather, the nine chapters are like nine lenses, each revealing a different perspective on the working of a kaleidoscopically colourful and changeable, universally creative mind. Or in other words, these are nine entrances into the Ligeti labyrinth, which will put visitors to the test with its unexpected junctions, passageways, blind alleys, wrong turns, mirrors and traps, and yet simultaneously offers an intellectual adventure. Quite in this sense, Ligeti described in 1991 his search for a creative path in a lecture entitled "Rhapsodic Thoughts on Music, Especially My Own Compositions": "I feel my way forward from piece to piece, in different directions, like a blind man in a labyrinth."

*

The present publication represents the complete catalogue of the exhibitions in Budapest and Basel, and its structure reproduces the exhibitions' division into nine sections. The majority of the 137 exhibits are pictured, particularly the documents that we regard as especially relevant for a given work or theme, or that have not yet appeared in print. Unless stated otherwise, the objects featured in the exhibition come from the György Ligeti Collection of the Paul Sacher Foundation. The descriptions are supplemented in most instances with notes that may be of assistance in interpreting and contextualising a particular object or document. In the case of text documents such as verbal sketches and letters, we have supplied transcriptions or translations where it seemed appropriate. Each chapter also

includes an introductory essay discussing the essential aspects of the chapter's theme and reflecting the selection of material featured in the exhibition.

The exhibition is a collaboration between the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel and the Institute for Musicology of the Research Centre for the Humanities HUN-REN in Budapest. The bulk of the exhibits come from the Foundation's György Ligeti Collection, which includes virtually the entirety of the composer's musical estate: musical and textual manuscripts, correspondence, recordings, photographs, and part of Ligeti's library. The establishment of the Basel Collection has a long history. As early as 1986, soon after the Paul Sacher Foundation opened, Ligeti was asked to consider handing over documents relating to his creative work. In the early 1990s, Ove Nordwall donated his extensive collection of early manuscripts, that Ligeti had given him as a sign of friendship. After a visit to the Basel archive in 1995, the composer reached the conclusion that it would indeed be best for all the documents relating to his work to be kept in the same place. An agreement between the two parties was finally reached in the summer of 2000, and a large part of Ligeti's archive was then transferred from Hamburg to Basel. The collection has since steadily grown, thanks to the acquisition of scattered manuscripts and correspondence. Following the composer's death in 2006, the remainder of the estate was transferred to the Foundation; finally, a substantial expansion came in 2019 in the form of materials from the archive of the Mainz publishing house Schott.

*

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the individuals and institutions who contributed to the exhibition and to the catalogue, which is being published in three languages. In particular, we wish to thank György Ligeti's heirs, Vera Ligeti and Lukas Ligeti, for the benevolent support they have offered our project from the start. We are also grateful to all those who have loaned documents and objects in their possession: Vera Ligeti (Vienna), Katalin Károlyi (Budapest), István Pávai (Budapest), the Amadinda Percussion Ensemble (Budapest) and Universal Edition (Vienna). We owe a great debt of gratitude to Felix Meyer and Florian Besthorn, the former and the current directors of the Paul Sacher Foundation, and also to Pál Richter, the director of the Institute for Musicology in Budapest, who have given our project their support, goodwill and assistance from the outset. We are indebted to Marc Zehntner, the director of the Historical Museum in Basel, for the wonderful cooperation and hospitality with which he welcomed our exhibition. The team at the Paul Sacher Foundation and the staff of both museums, as well as of the Archives for 20th- and 21st-Century Hungarian Music at the Institute for Musicology in Budapest, helped us in numerous ways with preparing the exhibition; we are deeply grateful for their assistance. We should also like to thank other individuals who helped us with advice and information: Helena Bugallo (Basel), Louise Duchesneau (Hamburg), Julia Heimerdinger (Vienna), Christian Hoesch, Christopher Peter and Yvonne Stern-Campo (Schott Music, Mainz), Gunild Vomstein (EB Theater Freiburg, Freiburg im Breisgau) and Horst Wittner (Isny).

Publishing the exhibition catalogue simultaneously in Hungarian, English and German has been no small challenge. We are deeply grateful to the translators and to all those who were involved in proofreading and in preparing the indexes, but also to Stefan Bieri and Marianne Doma, who committed themselves with vast patience to designing and setting the catalogue.

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Basel and Budapest, September 2023

Anna Dalos
Márton Kerékfy
Heidy Zimmermann

1T 3,5" 21'10" CA 20'30"
 10T 25" 21'10" CA 21'
 20T 4'30" 21'10" CA 21'
 40T 2'20" 21'10" CA 21'
 60T 3'5" 21'10" CA 21'
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 90T 5'45" 21'10" CA 21'

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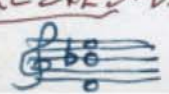
KÉSZ 5'30" 4'30"

① Virace luminoso
 BACH HEGL
 G-D-ANCIS SER

② Paracaglia: lento appassionato vad sóot-benn
 POLIFON YODEL ÉPÍTŐD (Rileu VII)
 hegetür-lomok Góga MASOS Cs-Fag (g!) SÓHÁZOK, ÉLES SZELŐNYOK, SÓKÍTÁSOK
 kialakul (teljes desnél) fluktuáció, irráció (benne örvények) AGRESSZÍV
 MELY DÜBÖRGÉSEK
 vége felé skatva-koral SCORPATURA ÉPÍTŐD
 VEGER-MANUS-BALKON
 ÉLES GÓGA AKSOK ÉPÍTŐD
 Br-cok c, solo Hcs G-húrigan gárvélés, SÍRÁSOK? VEGER SER

③ Prato: Shopant leles benne Duncan-alludok, dallamok
 SORABOZÁS SZERZŐSÉG (p. ANA) SEBES NÁTUR-GÓGA LSI LÓGÓ
 Bence pizzicato (húrok) mevede és agresszív epizód 3' 2'30"
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 Pólyafé-árv. és págán: to. PLYTH SI RASOK KROM. EL FELE FEJŐK
 KROMATIKUS NEM! VASZÓ: NITOX DITIA MOK LEFEJŐ JÓHÁGHELYEK
 HESKAR VITINE VASZÓ: NITOX DITIA MOK LEFEJŐ JÓHÁGHELYEK
 KINC DINGY DET STAV VASZÓ: NITOX DITIA MOK LEFEJŐ JÓHÁGHELYEK
 ④ Adagio (Andante) kristályos, üvegnyark, auroforma, éteri
 NATUR-kürtök: társai yodel - STATIKUS Heg. solo-nagy dallam, elcszik (Rileu VII)
 forma (v cellákonc.?) (úszószóppá sűrűsöbik)
 MIKROTONÁLIS +NAGY KINYV "3" *2. fele GBA'FA'
 FELHANG-RENDEZÉSBEN + Gemaltu chrom kethick és NAGY LASU FLUKTUÁCIÓ
 Főbb változat: az egész Góga alapoz RING.

⑤ Viracissimo
 DIATONIKUS örült nyilánkok, dallamok, Prati-Kamer
 EE A KERET: SZÍRES, FÉMES DUNCAN-LXD 3' 00"
 MÖGÖTTÉ: ELTOLÓDÓ RÁCSOK (Stroboskop-Film) PIZZI-RESE (ZIMBABWE)
 KEZDÉS: EX ABRVPTO, üvegexplobzióval
 +NAGY KINYV 4" VII RIGARU
 NORGÉ-SHETLANDI ÉPÍTŐD
 VII RIGARU



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