

György Ligeti, Friction, and the Uncertain Image

PETER NELSON

SUMMARY. The current succession of centenaries of members of a significant group of European composers who made their work in the second half of the twentieth century gives us cause to think again about the historical situation they faced, in the aftermath of the Second World War, and the ways in which their responses to that situation shaped both their creative output and the culture of the times. Using Anna Tsing's notion of *friction*, as a productive force emanating from the unresolved co-presence of differences, this article examines the work of György Ligeti, and considers how his experience of multiple displacements, as a European Jew who experienced both Nazi and Soviet invasions, contributed to the formation of an aesthetic of mystery and irony, formulated here as the production of the uncertain image.

Keywords: Ligeti, friction, Lowenhaupt Tsing, modernism, imperfection.

Now, in October of 2023, we are celebrating the centenary of the birth of the composer György Ligeti, born in 1923 in Diciosânmartin in Romanian Transylvania; as, last year, we marked the centenary of the birth of Iannis Xenakis, also born in Romania, of Greek parentage, in the town of Braïla. The proximity of these two events reminds us that we are now at a moment to think once again about that whole group of composers who radically changed the European musical tradition after 1945: thus, as centenaries go, next year we will celebrate Luigi Nono, the year after, Pierre Boulez and Luciano Berio, followed by György Kurtág, and - perhaps finally for this little group - in 2028 the youngest of them, Karlheinz Stockhausen. Of course, there are many other figures we can mention in the history of European music of the last hundred years, but this little group had a radical impact, and produced work of lasting value that still haunts us, even as we ponder a world with new social, political, environmental, and artistic preoccupations.

These artists made their work in the context of a Europe emerging from war, from the horrors of fascism and genocide, and split by political schism between East and West. Furthermore, as Theodor Adorno so famously expressed it, the industrialised murder perpetrated by the Nazi regime, and its commodification of race and difference put in question not

just the humanistic pretensions of art, but the very possibility of enlightened thought itself: what Adorno formulated as the dialectic between culture and barbarism.¹ Ligeti himself, as a European Jew, had his own personal experiences of barbarism. As he told the British journalist John Tusa, he suffered guilt at having survived the Holocaust when others in his family did not.²

Consequently, this group of composers, that Ligeti characterises as a “Club” connecting the localised cultures of Köln, Darmstadt, Paris, and Milan, attempted - whether consciously or not - to remake music, and to reassert the *possibility* of making music, in a Europe that had to come to terms with its own historical past and its own cultural past as ineradicably intertwined.³ It is notable that this club was not a totalising enterprise consolidated within a single *volk* – whatever its subsequent critics may have implied – but pan-European, asserting a common purpose in remaking music with German, French, Italian, Hungarian, Romanian sensibilities, even if the foundational insights were provided within the context of the Modernism of the old Austro-Hungarian empire, by Arnold Schönberg and his pupils, Anton von Webern and Alban Berg.

And now: as we contemplate war in the Eastern Mediterranean and in Ukraine; as we take stock of the consequences of a global pandemic, almost certainly engendered by the unthinking intrusion of the human activities of extraction into the deep recesses of the life of the planet; in the midst of a climate emergency that threatens to engulf our traditional ways of living, and brings the spectre of mass extinctions - perhaps even our own; *we also* have to think about the *possibility* of music, and about the continuing presence of the dialectic between culture and barbarism. Is poetry possible during a climate emergency, when, as Greta Thunberg tells us so simply, “Our house is falling apart”?⁴ How might this moment from nearly eighty years ago inform our response to current predicaments? It seems to me that if art has anything to give us, at any time, it is not just hope or consolation in

¹ Je totaler die Gesellschaft, um so verdinglichter auch der Geist und um so paradoxer sein Beginnen, der Verdinglichung aus Eigenem sich zu entwinden. ... Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber ... (The more total the society, the more reified the spirit and the more paradoxical its attempt to escape reification out of its own nature. ... Cultural criticism finds itself at the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism). Adorno, Theodor W. *Gesammelte Schriften in zwanzig Bänden: 10/1 Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 30.

² “I cannot accept that my brother was killed. He was five years younger than me. He lived exactly seventeen years. I saw him for the last time when he was sixteen. Then I was in the Hungarian army in labour service which was very, very difficult, but not as difficult as concentration camp. So, by chance I survived.” Tusa, John. *On Creativity: Interviews Exploring the Process*. Methuen, London, 2003, p. 189.

³ Ligeti, György. *Gesammelte Schriften I*. Schott, Mainz, 2007, p. 520.

⁴ Thunberg, Greta. *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*. Penguin Books, London, 2019, p. 30.

the midst of our preoccupations, but an image of the possibility of mediation across that divide that troubled Adorno. Mediation is always a to-ing and a fro-ing, a movement that testifies to the existence of both sides, but which is also a strategy for action, dependent on real insights. The music of Ligeti, besides its overpowering and dramatic beauty, seems to me to embody some important insights that give his work a continuing power and relevance, and it offers an aesthetic vision that contradicts the current predilection for polarised certainties.

I had the good fortune to meet György Ligeti first in 1973 when he was one of the guests, alongside Luciano Berio and the British composers Peter Maxwell Davies and Martin Dalby, at the Musica Nova Festival, organised by the University of Glasgow and the Scottish National Orchestra. I was able to attend rehearsals for the *Double Concerto for Flute and Oboe*, which was receiving its UK premiere, and to attend some classes with Ligeti. Ligeti's music made a deep and lasting impression on me, but the exact nature of that impression took some time to clarify. This was not helped by the fact that Ligeti's work itself changed over the years. When I met Ligeti for a second time, at the seminars run by Centre Acanthes in Aix-en-Provence in 1979, he had suffered a brief period of artistic upheaval - or so he expressed it to us: one which had resulted in two works that, for him, sprang out of the influence of popular music - something that at that time, perhaps due to the abhorrence for popular culture registered by Adorno, seemed almost impossible for a member of the European avant-garde, concerned as they were with re-forming a musical tradition tainted by fascism. Two works for solo harpsichord were performed, by Elisabeth Chojnacka, *Passacaglia ungherese*, and *Hungarian Rock (Chaconne)*, both written in 1978 and showing the influence of the American Minimalist composers, who had in fact appeared in an earlier work for two pianos from 1976, *Monument – Selbstporträt – Bewegung*, with its ironic presentation of a *Selbstporträt mit Reich und Riley*. This explicit influence of so-called American Minimalism was an indication that the project of re-making music, that had seemed to us, as students, so focused on the necessary principles of negation: a-tonality, a-thematicism, irrationality of metre and rhythm, could actually be – and was in fact - a much more open enterprise.

It was perhaps Ligeti's experience in 1972, during his five months as composer in residence at Stanford University in California, that initiated this particular stylistic change. But this experience also provoked in him a more fundamental reconsideration of the cultural forces within which music operates. In an article entitled, "New Music Tendencies in the USA" Ligeti remarks at length on his perceptions of Californian culture. He writes:

California is a country with an almost southern Italian lifestyle, more casual than puritanical. And then there is the dominating influence of East Asia. San Francisco is almost no longer an American city. Even the Americans

claim that. San Francisco is rather a mixture of different cultures, some of which have even remained intact. There is a Chinese, a Japanese, an Italian part of the city, but also the strangest intermediate stages of Americanisation: i.e. still-China, half-China, China on Hollywood glamour but with dirt stains and so on.⁵

This humorous and ironic reflection on cultural difference, and on the ways in which European preoccupations and cultural priorities become resituated within a Californian perspective seems to have affected Ligeti deeply. It seems to me to link up, in a certain way, both with his earlier experiences working as an ethnomusicologist in Hungary, and with his later interest in the musical traditions of Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, in the production of a particular, pluralistic aesthetic outlook. Amy Bauer and others have referred to this as a “cosmopolitan imaginary”, but I want to take the discussion in a slightly different direction.⁶

If so-called *serialism* was the founding method for a conscious break with the past of European music, it registered as monolithic; that is, as a re-inscription of a foundational space for musical thought, outside of the space created by diatonic tonality and regular metrics. Whatever happened inside that newly inscribed space, it nevertheless bore with it all the old imperatives of unity, integrity, coherence, singularity of purpose: in the imaginations of Boulez, Stockhausen, Nono, the technologies of the series defined a situation that - whatever its production of actual, sounding music - represented a new, unified, and coherent whole. Ligeti refers to this musical *ethos* in his homage to Theodor Adorno, where, in trying to account for Adorno’s rejection of Stravinsky, Ligeti writes, “German music bases itself on thematic-motivic development,”⁷ and – in this line of thinking - that is as true of Stockhausen and Webern as it is of Schoenberg and Brahms. The post-war re-invention of music could be seen to have some inbuilt prejudices. Thus, in Ligeti’s words, “With the sounds of a dead language, a new language would be spoken.”⁸

It seems that Ligeti, like Xenakis, was a critic of the serial project, even as he contributed significantly to the renovation of music that was its primary goal. The details of his critique we can pass over; what Ligeti represented to the classes that I attended in 1973 and 1979 was a music that was inherently multiple, not singular, and this multiplicity registered itself in a number of ways. First, Ligeti characterised his works as *polyphonic* but in a radical fashion. The term *micro-polyphony* was one that Ligeti himself used, but it is worth looking more deeply into the ways in which he described the

⁵ Ligeti, György. *Gesammelte Schriften I*. Schott, Mainz, 2007, p. 456.

⁶ See Bauer, Amy and Márton Kerékfy. *György Ligeti's Cultural Identities*. Routledge, London, 2017.

⁷ Ligeti, György. *Gesammelte Schriften II*. Schott, Mainz, 2007, p. 505.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 97.

workings of this approach, which is far more than just a way of building dense or massive textures.

In an interview with Ove Nordwall, broadcast on Südwestfunk Baden-Baden in 1968, Ligeti says:

there are certain passages ... in which a pitch or an interval or even several intervals - let us say old-fashioned chords - are clearly there. In the midst of such a chord, the "parasitic" notes then gradually sound; they are not ornaments in the sense of the passing notes or alternating notes of tonal music, but nevertheless contain a small allusion to them. The whole tradition of tonal music is present, but always hidden.⁹

Thus, multiplicity arises in the concept of a body and its parasites; a tradition and its histories. This veiling of cultural allusions is in fact even further veiled by the sounding surface of the music, since:

The fact that many neighbouring pitches are always played and that the string ensemble is divided into many individual instruments results in small fluctuations in intonation. For example, a violinist who goes from C to C-sharp and then to D will involuntarily reach this C-sharp higher, ... The small fluctuations that occur ... are a constructive element of the composition here. ... So... The music really has something artificial about it, it is an appearance.¹⁰

This conception of music, as a sort of *appearance* that arises out of conflicting elements seems to me to be a fundamental aspect of Ligeti's work, whose *uncertain* character is also a sort of strategy of *imperfection*.

As Ligeti described his work to us in students seminars, it contains movements or passages of different *types* of music: the two logical extremes of those types are presented in the title of a work from 1973 for choir and large ensemble, *Clocks and Clouds*, and to the clocks, and the clouds - which far from being statistical in the manner of Xenakis, are constructed from astonishingly detailed micro-structures - he added "tight-rope music": a music of extreme speeds and registers, that almost wills the performers to "fall off," and that thus courts imperfection of performance. It is often associated with a melodic gesture that begins with great purpose, but then fails to complete itself, a strategy fundamental to the expressive power of the *Chamber Concerto* of 1969-70.

Yet, multiplicity is different from variety. Variety, in a sense, is the ground of composition: Stockhausen puts it at the heart of the new musical revolution when he describes the difference between the old style and the new as: "not the same figures in an ever-changing light, but rather: different

⁹ Nordwall, Ove. *György Ligeti: Eine Monographie*. B. Schotts Söhne, Mainz, 1972, p. 131.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 130.

figures in the same light, which permeates everything.”¹¹ Variety does not trouble the claims of autonomy, authority, and exclusivity that critics such as Frederic Jameson level as charges against Modernism.¹² Multiplicity, on the other hand, involves what sociologist Irving Goffman theorised as “frames”, where a frame is a way of

differentiating the several different “worlds” that our attention and interest can make real for us, the possible subuniverses, the “orders of existence” ... in each of which an object of a given kind can have its proper being.¹³

Notably, the possibility to mistake or misconstrue frames is what leads us to humour, and humour was always a critical strategy in Ligeti’s work. The multiplicity inherent in his music goes deep, and concerns not just global textures like ticking clocks or ‘tight-rope’ virtuosity, but also tonal and even intonational strategies, as well as temporal flows and speeds, and cultural references. It registers a sense for multiplicity that can bring together, precisely, 16th century polyphonic voice leading and its history, the heterophony of certain African traditions, conflicting notions of temperament, conflicting strategies of time and repetition, within the realm of a single musical work. These multiple frames are evident, even to the most unsophisticated of listeners, and they give Ligeti’s work a sense of energy and ambivalence. If music can alert us to possible mediations of the tensions evident in the world, providing sometimes powerful moments of resistance, what mediating strategy can we see at work here?

One of the critical moments of our time concerns the notion of the global. From economic ‘globalisation’ to ‘global warming’ we are faced with a totalising scale that is out of all proportion to our personal experience, and which subsumes multiplicity within a sort of universal, even totalitarian frame. And yet, as anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing points out, “The universal offers us the chance to participate in the global stream of humanity.”¹⁴ Global connections make the world because they are implicated in all of its diversities of life and culture. Tsing’s insight is that neither *global* nor *universal* is a static category. As she writes,

Cultures are continuously co-produced in the interactions I call “friction”: the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interaction across

¹¹ Stockhausen, Karlheinz. “Arbeitsbericht 1952/53: Orientierung.” In Christoph von Blumröder (ed.) *Texte zur Musik I*. DuMont Buchverlag, Cologne, 1961, p.37.

¹² See Jameson, Frederic. *A Singular Modernity*. Verso, New York, 2002.

¹³ Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1986, p. 2.

¹⁴ Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *Friction. An Ethnology of Global Connection*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2005, p. 1.

difference.¹⁵

It seems to me that one of the key artistic insights of Ligeti, and perhaps one of his key lessons to us, now, was to value that exploration of 'interaction across difference', even within the very substrate of musical material. Thus, in an essay on Bartók's harmony, Ligeti notes Bartók's pluralistic use of tonality in his "tendency to symmetrically interchangeable harmonic centres."¹⁶ Similarly, in his programme note to the *Double Concerto for Flute and Oboe* (1972), Ligeti writes:

What interests me in particular ... of the numerous microtonal possibilities, and where I imagine I will find a new and fertile field, is the non-determined micro-interval ... an uncertain intonation which ... gives an impression of certainty.¹⁷

These sonic frames, coming as they do from both European and non-European notions of pitch and pitch-centre, scale, and interval, work alongside similar framings of pulse, metre, and texture to create a music of differences.

I do not read this as a "bringing together," within any sort of unified vision, of different cultural appropriations: from the Aka culture of Africa, from Africa and India via the Minimalist strategies of Steve Reich and Terry Riley, from the Italian Renaissance of Palestrina, and the fractal metric canons of Conlon Nancarrow; what has been referred to as the "cosmopolitan" nature of Ligeti's imagination. It seems to me that it is the *friction* that Anna Tsing notes as the producing force of culture that lies at the heart of Ligeti's perception of the global force of music, and it is through friction and the manipulation of frames of being that Ligeti confronts the uncertainties that beset both him and us. His openness to difference, his ability to work within conflicting frames and unresolved dualities, his wicked sense of the power of humour arising out of the confusion of frames of being, provide us with an exemplary strategy of mediation between the possibilities of culture and the ever-present history and future of barbarism. As he notes, in his discussion of the works *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures*:

Something was said, what we do not know, but also we *must* not know, since the affect of what was said is sufficiently clear. ... this music clarifies the isolation of the human condition.¹⁸ [my italics]

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 4.

¹⁶ Ligeti, György. *Gesammelte Schriften I*. Schott, Mainz, 2007, p. 302.

¹⁷ Ligeti, György. "Concert for Flute, Oboe, and Orchestra (1971/71)." Programme note: *Musica Nova*, Glasgow, 1973, p. 14.

¹⁸ "Es wird etwas gesagt, was wir nicht wissen, aber müssen es auch nicht wissen, den der affektive Inhalt des Gesagten wird hinreichend deutlich. ... diese Musik die menschliche

The final move in this strategy of friction seems to me to centre on a denial of the concrete, the pinned down and decided, the definite image of the reified mind described by Adorno:

Many people say: art must be true. I believe the opposite: art is allowed to lie. Art has to pretend something that doesn't exist. I don't mean a moral lie, but rather an appearance, a pretence.¹⁹

And then again, with a more forthright irony:

I think art is different from nature, I hate everything natural, healthy - it's wonderful when art is artificial. ... I don't want humanism, I'm anti-human.²⁰

The cloud-like textures of Ligeti's music are not, like the stochastic textures of Xenakis, some concrete outcome of natural laws. The clouds *and* the clocks, and the dualities of metric pulse, tonal centre, temperament, and "tight-rope" gestural energy create *uncertain images*, whose cloudy presence refuses to coalesce into an easy focus, recognising that *certainty is no longer appropriate*, and conveying to us the deep mystery of the real, and the presence within it of the macabre, the uncanny, the ridiculous, the downright comic;²¹ those shifting frames of being that defy the steady rigour of a mind and a mode of thinking already compromised by history, opening up our perceptions and imaginations to the conflicting energies of a world whose friction, as Anna Tsing reminds us, allows - in her words – "Utopian critiques (whose) critical perspectives we cannot do without - even if they will not be realised."²²

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A version of this paper was presented at a colloquium to mark the centenary of the birth of Ligeti: "György Ligeti - From the Sound Grain to the God Particle", hosted by the *Meridian* International Festival 2023, the Romanian Section of the ISCM, and The Union of Composers and Musicologists in Romania, at the National University of Music in Bucharest, 09 November 2023. This was the Second Edition of the International Avant-garde

Isolation verdeutlicht." Ligeti, György. *Gesammelte Schriften II*. Schott, Mainz, 2007, p. 81.

¹⁹ "Viele Leute sagen: Kunst muss wahr sein. Ich glaube das Gegenteil: Kunst darf lügen. Kunst muss etwas vortäuschen, was nicht existiert. Ich meine damit nicht eine moralische Lüge, vielmehr einen Schein, eine Vorspiegelung." Ligeti, György. *Gesammelte Schriften II*. Schott, Mainz, 2007, p.80.

²⁰ "Ich glaube, Kunst ist etwas anderes als Natur, ich hasse alles Natürlich, Gesunde - es ist wunderbar, wenn Kunst artifiziell ist. ... ich möchte keinen Humanismus, ich bin antihuman." Ibid. p. 81-82.

²¹ "... das unerhört und rätselhaft, dämonisch und ironisch ist." Ibid. p. 84.

²² Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *Friction. An Ethnology of Global Connection*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2005, p. 268.

Conferences initiated by ICCM Braşov/Kronstadt, co-ordinated by Prof. Laurentiu Beldean.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Gesammelte Schriften in zwanzig Bänden: 10/1 Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1977
- Bauer, Amy and Márton Kerékfy. *György Ligeti's Cultural Identities*. Routledge, London, 2017.
- Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1986.
- Jameson, Frederic. *A Singular Modernity*. Verso, New York, 2002.
- Ligeti, György. *Concert for Flute, Oboe, and Orchestra (1971/71)*. Programme note. *Musica Nova*, Glasgow, 1973.
- Ligeti, György. *Gesammelte Schriften I & II*, ed. by Monika Lichtenfeld. Schott, Mainz, 2007.
- Nordwall, Ove. *György Ligeti: Eine Monographie*. B. Schott's Söhne, Mainz, 1972.
- Stockhausen, Karlheinz. "Arbeitsbericht 1952/53: Orientierung." In Christoph von Blumröder (ed.) *Texte zur Musik I*. DuMont Buchverlag, Cologne, 1961.
- Thunberg, Greta. *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*. Penguin Books, London, 2019.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *Friction. An Ethnology of Global Connection*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2005.
- Tusa, John. *On Creativity: Interviews Exploring the Process*. Methuen, London, 2003.