

Julia Heimerdinger (Wien)

How György Ligeti had his Number One

Eleven Rules for *Atmosphères*' Success*

As is well known, *Atmosphères* for orchestra (1961) was a key work in György Ligeti's career and became his most famous and most successful piece. With a minimum of 526 performances¹ since its premiere on 22 October 1961 and 12 different recordings² released on dozens of disc editions, it outnumbers other outstandingly famous new music works, like Pierre Boulez's *Le Marteau sans Maître* from 1954, in different categories.³

Atmosphères is one of very few 20th century works that made it into the mainstream canon, into a separate new music canon, and into standard repertory. This cannot be explained just by its use as film music in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001 – A Space Odyssey* from 1968, though the piece's prominent placement certainly played a role. To explain its tremendous success, I will specify which musical and non-musical factors are accountable. As it turns out, Ligeti followed some of the rules of the business.

Two analyses back my argumentation: Firstly, *The Manual (How to Have a Number One the Easy Way)* by Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty⁴ (1988), who formed the acid house band The KLF in the 1980s. Secondly, Anne Shreffler's article *Musical Canonization and Decanonization in the Twentieth Century* (2013).⁵ Both analyse the conditions under which a piece of music makes it into the charts or is seen as part of the musical canon (and part of a separate new music canon), respectively. The details and source materials concerning György Ligeti

* This paper was presented at the conference *Ligeti's Legacy in Retrospect*, held at Cluj-Napoca, Romania, 26–27 May 2016. I would like to thank Anthony Kroytor for his English proofread.

1 Counted: 200 performances from 30 August 1972 to 29 November 1996 (Universal Edition Vienna [henceforth referred to as UE], archive papers) + 326 performances from 7 December 1996 to 21 April 2016 (UE, performance calendar online). The performances after the premiere and before 30 August 1972 could unfortunately not be determined.

2 The conductors were: Hans Rosbaud, Hermann Scherchen, Leonard Bernstein, László Somogyi, Ernest Bour, Seiji Ozawa, Claudio Abbado, John Mauceri, Simon Rattle, Thomas Kalb, Jonathan Nott, David Afkham.

3 *Le Marteau sans Maître* has been performed at least 387 times after its first performance on 18 June 1955. Counted: 197 performances from 7 October 1972 to 30 July 1996 (UE, archive papers) + 189 performances from 12 September 1996 to 15 March 2016 (UE, performance calendar online). The performances after the premiere and before 7 October 1972 could unfortunately not be determined. There are seven recordings, of which only two are not conducted by Pierre Boulez (I indicate conductor/singer): Boulez/Yvonne Minton, Boulez/Jeanne Deroubaix, Boulez/Marie-Thérèse Cahn, Boulez/Hilary Summers, Boulez/Elizabeth Lawrence, Robert Craft/Margery McKay, Odaline de la Martinez/Linda Hirst.

4 Bill Drummond / Jimmy Cauty, *The Manual (How to Have a Number One the Easy Way)*, London 1988. German edition: *Das Handbuch – der schnelle Weg zum Nr. 1-Hit*, Berlin 1998. As I couldn't get hold of any printed English version, I use the quotes from <<http://freshonthenet.co.uk/the-manual-by-the-klf/>>, 24 May 2016. Page references will refer to the German edition in parantheses.

5 Anne C. Shreffler, *Musical Canonization and Decanonization in the Twentieth Century*, English version of: *Musikalische Kanonisierung und Dekanonisierung im 20. Jahrhundert*, in: Klaus Pietschmann / Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann (ed.), *Der Kanon der Musik: Theorie und Geschichte. Ein Handbuch*, München 2013. Quotes are from the English version (currently available in docx-format at Anne C. Shreffler's page on academia.edu, 9 August 2016).

and *Atmosphères* predominantly stem from my doctoral research examining the composer's commentary and the secondary literature on the work.⁶

Rule 1 – Internalise the scene

To be successful as a composer – or as Drummond and Cauty would say: producer – one must understand the music scene, identify the most successful works of the time and analyse them. *The Manual* advises: »Watch Top of the Pops religiously every week and learn from it.«⁷ Or: »Between you sipping this cup of tea and getting to Number One you are going to be involved with a lot of people along the way and from all these people you can learn a lot. Whether they are just a tea boy or an international super star you bump into down at TV. Centre while doing Top of the Pops, everybody involved in this music game has some sort of insight or angle on it all. Listen to what they all have to say but take nothing as gospel; you are going to have to start building up your own picture of how it all moves.«⁸

Repeat: »Thursday evening. A cosy mild depression will settle in. Watch Top of the Pops. Read a music paper. Then let Friday roll by at its own speed.«⁹

Arriving in Western Europe in 1956, Ligeti had already unerringly identified the two most prominent composers and their most interesting works and techniques. Pierre Boulez's *Structures I a* (1952) and *Le Marteau sans maître* (1954), and Karlheinz Stockhausen's electronic music. At the Studio for Electronic Music in Cologne Ligeti tried out different techniques and, in the course of composing his electronic pieces (*Glissandi*, 1957, *Artikulation*, 1958, and *Pièce électronique no. 3*, 1957–58, that was not realized until 1996), he found out how to compose the textures for *Atmosphères*.¹⁰ Then, in 1958 and 1959, respectively, he analysed Boulez's *Structures I a* and *Le Marteau sans maître* carefully to realise, among other things, how much a certain habitus and use of percussion, annoyed him.

In an introduction of Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître* for the West German Radio in Cologne on 21 May 1959, Ligeti states: »Concerning its tonal and formal nature, the work is unique and inimitable. What a pity that it has still been imitated so often, even by Boulez himself. Its accumulation of vibraphone, gongs and maracas pushes the envelope of tolerability and the art of this almost too beautiful music dangerously approaches the realm of arts and crafts. Under the feet of the epigones, and of the epigones of the epigones, the world is drowning in the floods of vibrato-motors, and the tubular bells gently ring to the burial of those who passed away from vibraphone poisoning.«¹¹

6 Julia Heimerdinger, *Sprechen über Neue Musik. Eine Analyse der Sekundärliteratur und Komponistenkommentare zu Pierre Boulez' »Le Marteau sans maître« (1954), Karlheinz Stockhausens »Gesang der Jünglinge« (1956) und György Ligetis »Atmosphères« (1961)*, Halle, Univ., Diss., 2013, <<http://digital.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/id/1801704>>, 22 July 2016. Printed version: Berlin 2014.

7 Drummond / Cauty, *The Manual* (see footnote 4), (p. 15).

8 Ibid., (p. 31).

9 Ibid., (p. 104).

10 See esp. Jennifer Joy Iverson's work on the subject: *Historical Memory and György Ligeti's Sound-Mass Music 1958–1968*, Dissertation, University of Texas in Austin 2009.

11 György Ligeti, introduction to a radio broadcast of Pierre Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître* on 21 May 1959,

A note among the composition sketches for *Atmosphères* from the György Ligeti Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel is obviously related to this introductory text: »The time will come when vibraphone poisoning will cause an allergy to all percussion. All percussion bores me. Let's get rid of this stupid percussion at last!«¹²

This statement not only explains why the piece's score is subtitled »for orchestra without percussion«, but also exemplifies Ligeti's vehemence in demarcating the contemporary music scene – brusquely turning away from the works he has exhaustively analysed.

Rule 2 – Be of music-historical significance

Music-historical significance is one indicator for canonical works, as Anne Shreffler stresses: »Some works, the most famous example being Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*, mark a definitive moment in music history, when innovations in technique, form, tonal systems, rhythm, or other aspects were introduced.«¹³

Following his *Apparitions* (1958–59), Ligeti's first orchestral piece, which had gained wider attention, *Atmosphères* was his first work to leave out most reminiscences of existing styles and formulate a single characteristic musical vision. He heeded both his aversion and his musical vision and left musical figures and percussion out. To communicate this demarcation, or the work's otherness, Ligeti used an exceedingly violent vocabulary, which was quickly picked up in the secondary literature and is still there today (while it stayed in Ligeti's own writing for only ten years after the premiere). In an interview with Josef Häusler, Ligeti said that in *Atmosphères*, he had »destroyed the intervals«.¹⁴ In the secondary literature, for instance in the 1994 edition of the German music history book *dtv-Atlas der Musik* one reads: »Ligeti [...] destroys the intervals, eliminates the harmonics and suspends the usual rhythm.«¹⁵ Ligeti's strong statements made it easy for music journalists and music historians to locate his work in the vast land of modern stylistic attempts, which Ligeti, in another note, characterized ironically: »Serial music is intelligent. Aleatoric music is amusing. Lots of per-

23:15, at West German Radio Cologne. »Das Werk ist in seiner klanglichen und formalen Besonderheit einmalig und unnachahmlich. Schade, daß man es dennoch so oft imitierte, Boulez selbst nicht einmal angenommen. Was hier nämlich an Vibraphon, Gongs und Maracas angehäuft ist, geht bis an die Grenze des Erträglichen, und die Kunst dieser fast schon zu schönen Musik nähert sich gefährlich dem Bereich des Kunstgewerbes. Unter den Füßen der Epigonen und der Epigonen der Epigonen geht aber die Welt in den Fluten der Vibratomotoren unter, und sanft läuten Röhrenglocken zur Bestattung der an Vibraphonvergiftung Hingeschiedenen.« WDR archive, radio script IV-26422.

12 »[?] Es [?] die Zeit [possibly: »kommen«] wo die Vibraphonvergiftung gegen alles Schlagzeug allergisch macht. Es langweilt mich alles Schlagzeug. Weg endlich mit diesem dummen Schlagzeug!« In: Sketches of *Atmosphères*, György Ligeti Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation Basel (henceforth referred to as GLC, PSF).

13 Shreffler, *Musical Canonization* (see footnote 5), p. 10.

14 »In *Apparitions* und *Atmosphères* bin ich abgekommen von der Arbeit mit Harmonik, oder ganz allgemein: von der kompositorischen Arbeit mit Intervallen. Ich habe die Intervalle zerstört«, György Ligeti / Josef Häusler, *Zwei Interviews mit György Ligeti (1967)*, in: Ove Nordwall, *György Ligeti. Eine Monographie*, Mainz 1971, p. 127.

15 »Ligeti [...] zerstört damit die Intervalle, eliminiert die Harmonik und hebt die gewohnte Rhythmik auf«; Ulrich Michels, *dtv-Atlas zur Musik*, vol. 2, München ⁸1994, p. 551.

cussion sounds modern. Musical graphics are pretty and changes of the seating plan impressive.«¹⁶

Consequently, *Atmosphères* was labelled ›post-serialist‹, a term indicating what the music is not. Positively defined, the work was labelled with ›Micropolyphony‹ and ›Klangfarbenmusik‹ (›tone-colour music‹ or ›timbre music‹), the latter term not making Ligeti particularly happy, but being extremely helpful to communicate the work.

The piece's form and musical texture were innovative enough to be recognized as significant, even though the technique of total *divisi* has already been used in Iannis Xenakis's work *Metastaseis* (1953–54, premiered in 1955 at the Donaueschingen Festival).

Rule 3 – Sound unusual and distinctive but not so unusual as to be distracting

To enter the concert repertory or to be suitable for a modern blockbuster film, a new music piece should – to say it along with Stanley Kubrick this time – »sound unusual and distinctive but not so unusual as to be distracting«.¹⁷

While *Atmosphères* is undoubtedly unusual and distinctive compared with works from the classical concert canon, it is in some respects not so unusual. The playing with sound masses and timbres per se is nothing new and has been heard before, for example, in the music of Richard Wagner (*Rheingold-prelude* from 1869) or Arnold Schönberg (*Colors* from his *Five Orchestral Pieces* Op. 16 from 1909). Moreover, and considering its use as film music – it is very easy to fade it in and out at almost any point.

Rule 4 – Have the right position in the list of works

Note: »The type of devotion inspired amongst pubescent teenage girls for a certain singer or band takes effect on the second or third single.«¹⁸ Obviously, the devotion for *Atmosphères* took effect only after *Apparitions* gained some attention a year earlier.

This leads on to »The Golden Rules of Chart Pop« formulated in Drummond and Cauty's *Manual* which can – by the simple exchange or removal of a few words – be turned into ›Four

16 »[Serielle Musik ist gescheit. Die ›aleatorische‹ unterhaltsam. Viel Schlagzeug klingt modern. Musikalische Grafiken sind hübsch und die [...] (Änderung) der Sitzordnung im Orchester [...] (Eindrucksvoll).]« Programme text draft, in: Sketches of *Atmosphères*, GLC, PSF.

17 See Jeremy Bernstein's description in: Stanley Kubrick, *Profile: Stanley Kubrick*, Interview by Jeremy Bernstein, in: Gene Phillips (ed.), *Stanley Kubrick: Interviews*, Jackson 2001, p. 38: »[T]here was a phonograph and an enormous collection of records, practically all of them contemporary music. Kubrick told me that he thought he had listened to almost every modern composition available on records in an effort to decide what style of music would fit the film. Here, again, the problem was to find something that sounded unusual and distinctive but not so unusual as to be distracting. In the office collection were records by the practitioners of musique concrète and electronic music in general, and records of works by the contemporary German composer Carl Orff. In most cases, Kubrick said, film music tends to lack originality and a film about the future might be the ideal place for a really striking score by a major composer.« Cited in: Kate McQuiston, »An effort to decide«: *More Research into Kubrick's Music Choices for »2001: A Space Odyssey«*, in: *Journal of Film Music* Vol. 3, No. 2 (2011), p. 146.

18 Drummond / Cauty, *The Manual* (see footnote 4), (p. xxi).

Golden Rules of Successful New Music. The following quotes come from *The Manual*, ~~re-~~
~~movals~~ and *inserts* will be marked.

(Golden) Rule 5 – Have an irresistible draw

»Firstly, it has to have a ~~dance groove sound~~ that will run all the way through the ~~record~~ piece and that the current ~~7th buying generation concert-going public~~ will find irresistible.«¹⁹

(Golden) Rule 6 – Be of reasonable duration

»Secondly, it must be no longer than ~~three minutes and thirty seconds~~ *10 minutes* (just under ~~3'20~~ *10* is preferable). If they are any longer ~~Radio One daytime DJs orchestras will start fading early or talking over the end, when the chorus is finally being hammered home not be able to place it before a symphony or a concerto in the first half of a concert programme – the most important part of any record.~~«²⁰

(Golden) Rule 7 – Have a characteristic structure

»Thirdly, it must consist of an intro, ~~a verse, a chorus, second verse, a second chorus,~~ a breakdown section, ~~back into a double length chorus~~ and outro.«²¹

Even though *Atmosphères* is one slowly changing sound mass, it contains a most dramatic breakdown section at the shift from section F to G with its four high piccolos and the following double bass drone. Not to forget the smoothly brushed diminuendo at the end of the piece.

(Golden) Rule 8 – Have some extramusical content

»Fourthly, ~~lyrics~~ *extramusical content*. You will need some, but not ~~many~~ *much*.«²²

Extramusical associations are not only suggested by the pieces' French title but also by Ligeti's commentary: »It is dedicated in memoriam to Mátyás Seiber and contains moments of a requiem in symbolic form.«²³ What more can you do?

Rule 9 – Deal with emotions

»The lyrics for the chorus must never deal with anything but the most basic of human emotions. This is not us trying to be cynical in a clever sort of way when we say ›stick to the clichés‹. The clichés are the clichés because they deal with the emotional topics we all feel. No records are bought in vast quantities because the lyrics are intellectually clever or deal in

19 Ibid., (p. 50).

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 György Ligeti, *Über »Atmosphères«* (1963), in: Monika Lichtenfeld (ed.), *György Ligeti: Gesammelte Schriften*, 2 vols., Mainz 2007 (= Publications of the Paul Sacher Foundation 10), vol. 2, p. 181: »Es ist dem Andenken an Mátyás Seiber gewidmet und enthält in symbolischer Form Momente eines Requiems.«

strange and new ideas. In fact, the lyrics can be quite meaningless in a literal sense but still have a great emotional pull.«²⁴

Clearly, one reason why *Atmosphères* is liked is its emotional charisma, which is partly owed to its continuous flow of different states and its specific dynamics – wide, narrow, shrill, grumbling, strong, tender, and so on. In an interview with Monika Meynert in 1971, Ligeti talks about the role of the emotional:

Monika Meynert: [...] »The avant-garde partly presented itself in a way that one could believe they don't have any feelings, they work only mechanically. The process and the artificial are given priority. But this is not the case with you.«

György Ligeti: »Yes. And I believe it is not the case with the others. In the 50s it was fashionable to emphasise the speculative. So it was among my colleagues, whose music I do like a lot, especially Stockhausen and Boulez. I believe they also work emotionally.«

Meynert: »But you were one of the first to bring the emotional into play again, and to set a precedent with it. Is this perhaps because of your Hungarian origin?«

Ligeti: »No, No. Well, emotions are international.«²⁵

So much for clichés.

Rule 10 – Appear in another's books

A main indicator for a canonical work is »[t]he number of books and articles written about [it]. This indicates a certain level of interest and engagement, and implies at least the expectation of longevity.«²⁶ *Atmosphères* has been the subject of more than a dozen in-depth analyses and dozens of other texts. Moreover, it is mentioned in almost every book on the history of western music since the 1980s. As for the analyses and introductions from the decade following the piece's premiere, Ligeti actually took an active part in the writing. First of all in the writing of musicologist Harald Kaufmann, with whom Ligeti extensively communicated concerning his analysis, which was published in 1964 as the first comprehensive text on *Atmosphères*. In this much-quoted text, Kaufmann picked up many correction suggestions from Ligeti who thus checked on how his work was received – not least including a change of the article's title from *Klangfarbentextur unter dem Mikroskop* to *Strukturen im Strukturlosen*.²⁷

24 Drummond / Cauty, *The Manual* (see footnote 4), (pp. xii–xvii).

25 Monika Meynert: »[...] Die Avantgarde hat sich teilweise so gezeigt, dass man glaubte, die haben gar kein Gefühl, die arbeiten nur mechanisch. Das Machen, das Artifizielle steht doch sehr im Vordergrund. Das ist bei Ihnen aber nicht der Fall.« / György Ligeti: »Nicht der Fall. Und ich glaub bei anderen auch nicht. Es war Mode in den 50er Jahren zu betonen das Spekulative. Es war bei meinen Kollegen, [...] deren Musik ich sehr gern habe – also in den 50er Jahren waren vor allem Stockhausen und Boulez. Man sagte sie arbeiten sehr spekulativ. Sie arbeiten genauso emotionell glaube ich.« / Meynert: »Das hängt nicht mit Ihrem ... Sie waren ja einer der ersten, der das Emotionelle eigentlich mehr ins Spiel brachte und betont hat und darin eigentlich auch Schule gemacht hat. Liegt das vielleicht auch ein bisschen an Ihrer ungarischen Abstammung?« / Ligeti: »Nein. Nein. Also Gefühle sind international.« In: *György Ligeti: Ein Komponist gibt Auskunft. Ein Portrait von Monika Meynert*, television broadcast, ZDF, first broadcast: 4 January 1970, 22:10, transcript by the author.

26 Shreffler, *Musical Canonization* (see footnote 5), p. 9.

27 See Harald Kaufmann, *Strukturen im Strukturlosen. Über György Ligetis »Atmosphères«*, in: Id., *Spurlinien: analytische Aufsätze über Sprache und Musik*, Wien 1969, p. 107–117.

Rule 11 – Be complex, but hide it

Now for *Atmosphères*' place in a separate new music canon. As Shreffler describes it: »A separate canon of contemporary music esteemed by composers, academics, and educated musicians has arisen; its contents can be roughly deduced from university curricula and (to a lesser extent) from the continuing segregation of new music in record stores. This canon is based on a historiography of twentieth century music as a series of technical and formal accomplishments, starting with atonality and ranging from the twelve-tone technique to serialism to indeterminacy, polystylism, New Complexity, and beyond. In this canon, which is a kind of mirror image of the concert canon, Webern is ranked higher than Richard Strauss; Boulez higher than Henze, and Ferneyhough higher than Menotti.«²⁸

I may add: Ligeti is ranked higher than Penderecki, according to the often heard statement that Ligeti worked with »careful compositional calculation«²⁹ – instead of drawing blocks.

And to quote Shreffler again, »although the new musical canon shares many values with the mainstream one (such as a preference for a ›Werkekanon,‹ with works valued for their innovation, uniqueness, and multifacetedness), it distinguishes itself by privileging intellectual qualities and complexity over popularity.«³⁰

The fact that *Atmosphères*' complexity is not imposed upon the audience but there for anyone who wants to explore it, that the piece is popular though it is complex, and regarded as complex by academics though it is popular, is indeed an extraordinary case in the new music business.

Congratulations

- ☆ 12 October 1968: MGM's soundtrack album of Stanley Kubrick's *2001 – A Space Odyssey* hits #1 in the Billboard charts' *Best selling Classical LPs*.
- ☆ 2001: The 50th text on *Atmosphères* is published.
- ☆ 2002: The 10th recording of *Atmosphères* is released.
- ☆ 8 August 2014: The 500th (countable)³¹ performance of *Atmosphères* takes places.

»You are now at Number One. This is forever. It is now totally out of your hands.«³²

28 Shreffler, *Musical Canonization* (see footnote 5), p. 11.

29 »Was bei Penderecki als ein nur selten über den wirkungsästhetischen Zweck hinaus reflektiertes Mittel eingesetzt ist, nahm im Œuvre György Ligetis als eine höchst differenzierte Kunstidee Gestalt an. [...] Der Eindruck eines amorphen, in den Konturen verwischten, zerfließenden Klanggebildes ergibt sich indessen durch ein sehr sorgfältiges kompositorisches Kalkül.« Hermann Danuser, *Die Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Laaber 1992 (= Neues Handbuch der Musikwissenschaft 7), p. 388.

30 Shreffler, *Musical Canonization* (see footnote 5), p. 11–12.

31 See footnote 1.

32 Drummond / Cauty, *The Manual* (see footnote 4), (p. 129).