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The Historical Significance and Performance Practice of György Ligeti's *Musica ricercata*

While the compositions of Hungarian composer György Ligeti (1923 – 2006) have been highly regarded since the emergence of his music in the popular mainstream with the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, many of his early works remain woefully disregarded by theorists, musicologists, and performers.[1] Beginning with *Musica ricercata* for solo piano in 1953, Ligeti undertook a compositional-theoretical project to create a new musical language based on the most fundamental musical elements, eschewing the folklorism and Socialist Realist aesthetics to which he was bound in his public compositional output.[2] It is the aim of the present paper to draw attention to the fertile musical territory that Ligeti explores in *Musica ricercata* and to assess the work's creation, reception, availability in modern editions, performance practice, and its role in Ligeti's compositional development.

In a manner similar to many of his contemporary composers in the West, Ligeti began to reconsider the fundamentals of musical aesthetics after World War II, especially with regard to pitch organization and texture.[3] In his later reflections on writing *Musica ricercata* from 1951 to 1953, Ligeti writes, "In 1951 I began to experiment with very simple structures of sonorities and rhythms as if to build up a new kind of music starting from nothing. My approach was frankly Cartesian, in that I regarded all the music I knew and loved as being, for my purpose, irrelevant

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[1] Robin Holloway, "Ligeti's Half-Century," *Musical Times* 145, no. 1889 (Winter 2004): 60.

[2] Márton Kerékfy, "'A "new music" from Nothing': György Ligeti's *Musica ricercata,*" *Studia Musicologica* 49, no. 3-4 (September 2008): 204.

[3] Joseph Auner, *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries: Western Music in Context,* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2013), 240.

and even invalid. I set myself such problems as: what can I do with a single note?"[4] Ligeti's "Cartesian project" to recreate his musical language is especially striking given his unfamiliarity in 1953 with the music and ideas of his contemporaries and predecessors in the West. Ligeti himself notes, "at the time, I hadn't the faintest idea of the developments which led up to serial music and which were then evolving in Western Europe. I was even totally oblivious of Schoenberg's method of composition… not to mention Webern's procedures."[5] Even as composers such as Stockhausen and Boulez were continuing to carry forward the atonal/serialist project that started with the Second Viennese School, Ligeti was pushing ahead with a similarly radical, though independent, exploration in search of the basis for a new avant-garde music.[6]

The compositional plan of *Musica ricercata* revolves around a scheme where each movement uses a set of pitch classes that is one element larger than the pitch class set of the prior movement. For example, movement one uses only two pitch classes (A and D), while movement two uses three pitch classes (E#, F#, and G), etc. By movement eleven, Ligeti obtains the total chromatic, and all twelve pitches circulate freely in a twelve-tone fugue.

While the accumulation of pitch classes over the course of *Musica ricercata* is a well-documented feature of the work, equally striking is the appearance of symmetrical pitch structures in ten of the eleven movements. Daniel Grantham notes that there is no definitive evidence that Ligeti consciously planned this feature of the work— indeed some of these symmetrical structures may occur trivially as a by-product of using consecutive pitches from the

[4] Ligeti quoted in Richard Steinitz, *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 54.
[5] Ligeti quoted in Steinitz, *György Ligeti*, 54.
[6] Lois Svard, "Illusion in Selected Keyboard Works of György Ligeti" (D.M.A. diss., Peabody Conservatory of Music, 1990), 16.

chromatic scale— but the consistency of these symmetrical structures is an important underlying characteristic.[7]

Ligeti's compositional explorations in *Musica ricercata* would propel his aesthetic principles forward and greatly impact his later compositional output.[8] For example, instances of fugue, canonic imitation, polytemi, and careful pitch-organization among the movements of *Musica ricercata* (especially in movements seven and eleven) prefigure the role of tempo, polyphony, and micropolyphony in later works such as *Apparitions, Atmosphères,* and *Automne à Varsovie*.

Ligeti himself notes that he was already considering the principles of his later "texture music" works at the same time that he would have been composing *Musica ricercata:* "I first began to think about a kind of static music you find in *Atmosphères* and *Apparitions* in 1950; music wholly enclosed within itself, free of tunes, in which there are separate parts but they are not discernable… I could *hear* the music I imagined but I did not possess the *technique* of imagining it put on paper."[9] *Musica ricercata*, then, is one of Ligeti's first attempts towards capturing the compositional devices that would enable his later, widely successful works.

While Ligeti strove to separate the movements of *Musica ricercata* from the influence of his earlier works and aesthetic interests, (especially the music of Béla Bartók), he clearly makes some references to broader musical traditions and influences.[10] Ligeti alludes to the sound of an organ-grinder (movement four), to the music of Bartók (movement nine, "Béla Bartók in memoriam") and to the composer Frescobaldi (movement eleven, "Omaggio a Girolamo

[7] Daniel Grantham, "Ligeti's Early Experiments In Compositional Process: Simple Structures in *Musica ricercata*" (M.M. thesis, University of North Texas, 2014), 12.
[8] Kerékfy, "'A "new music" from Nothing'," 204.
[9] György Ligeti et al., *György Ligeti in Conversation* (London: Ernst Eulenburg Ltd, 1983), 33.
[10] Steinitz, *György Ligeti,* 54 - 57.

Frescobaldi"). This last allusion helps clarify the nature of Ligeti's experimental project, as well as the meaning of the work's title— *Musica ricercata*.

Richard Steinitz notes that the eleventh movement of *Musica ricercata* is, in fact, modeled on the "Ricercar cromatico" from Frescobaldi's *Messa degli Apostoli.*[11] As Imogene Horsley defines the term in *Fugue: History and Practice*, *ricercare* or *ricercata* refers to a "master fugue in which all the material [is] derived from the subject and countersubjects and in which the composer show[s] off his contrapuntal skill."[12] As the eleventh movement of *Musica ricercata* follows the standard form of a fugue exposition (including separation of entrances by the interval of a fifth), it seems that Ligeti had in mind both Frescobaldi's "Ricercar cromatico" and the historical tradition of the *ricercare* fugue when he devised the masterful 12-tone fugue that ends *Musica ricercata*.

Further still, Ligeti more generally adopts the custom of *oblighi* composition that Frescobaldi practiced in his own works, setting compositional tasks, obligations, rules, and constraints in order to stimulate his creativity and ingenuity.[13] Horsley explicitly cites Frescobaldi when defining the *oblighi* tradition in Western music, stating that "an *obligo*, an arbitrary restriction like the avoidance of stepwise motion in the *Ricercar… obligo di non uscir di grado* of Girolamo Frescobaldi… was set up by the composer, and he worked within this limitation."[14] The scheme that Ligeti follows over the course of the work— gradually increasing the size of the pitch class set— also falls into this historical tradition, making each movement of *Musica ricercata* an *obligo,* and placing the work in a category of compositional and contrapuntal exploration that includes Bach's *Art of Fugue*, Beethoven's *Große Fuge*, and

[11] Steinitz, *György Ligeti,* 57.
[12] Imogene Horsley, *Fugue: History and Practice* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 291.
[13] Steinitz, *György Ligeti,* 57.
[14] Horsley, *Fugue,* 19.

Hindemith's *Ludus Tonalis*. Furthermore, the term *ricercata* (or its French equivalent, *recherchée)* quite explicitly points to Ligeti's sense of "searching" for a new style that would move past both his censorious political environment and his own artistic technical limitations.[15]

Because Ligeti so intentionally pursued novel musical resources and formal pitch structures in *Musica Ricercata*, the work did not receive an immediate premiere in Hungary upon its completion in 1953. Rather, the work was written in private and consigned, in Ligeti's words, to "the bottom drawer."[16] The Soviet Union's censorship of "formalist" works during the Cold War meant that only the most accessible of Ligeti's folk-inspired works were allowed to be performed. Benjamin Levy characterizes the intense level of scrutiny that Ligeti and his colleagues faced from the official committee hearings of 1950s Hungary: "the unpredictable outcomes of these hearings, where even a strongly folk-influenced work could be found too dissonant and modern and the vote of one committee could be overturned without a clear rationale, pushed Ligeti … to work in secret, writing some works for public approval but keeping others private."[17] Levy later notes that the *Musica ricercata's* "'formalist' scheme … surely had no chance of getting past the censors," and it was not until 1969 that the work received its premiere in Sweden.[18]

Since the premiere, Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, Mainz has been the sole publisher of both *Musica ricercata* and Ligeti's *Six Bagatelles*, (a transcription of selected movements from *Musica ricercata* for woodwind quintet). Robert Busan points out that the slow recognition of *Musica ricercata* may be due to the work's delayed publication with Schott in 1995, over a

[15] Kerékfy, "'A "new music" from Nothing'," 230.

[16] Ligeti quoted in Benjamin Levy, *Metamorphosis in Music: The Compositions of György Ligeti in the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11.

[17] Levy, *Metamorphosis in Music,* 11.

[18] Levy, *Metamorphosis in Music,* 13.

quarter-century after the work's premiere.[19] Conversely, the *Six Bagatelles* were published in 1973, allowing considerably more time for the set to become a cornerstone of the contemporary woodwind quintet literature.[20] While no facsimile of *Musica ricercata* is publicly available, the original manuscripts of the work are held by the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, Switzerland; the inventory of the György Ligeti Collection is available from Schott in the *Sammlung György Ligeti: Musikmanuskripte (Inventare der Paul Sacher Stiftung, Vol. 34).*

Though the Schott edition is the only widely available version of the score, it is worth noting that a considerable primary source for *Musica ricercata* exists in the form of an interactive website produced by the Stiftung Klavier-Festival Ruhr and the longtime Ligeti-collaborator, pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard.[21] The *Explore the Score* website provides video performances of movements one, five, and seven alongside a digitally "annotated" copy of the Schott score. The annotations consist of masterclass videos where Aimard elaborates on specific performance practices, (often quoting comments from his rehearsals with Ligeti) as well as digitized versions of Ligeti's own hand-written annotations from Aimard's physical copy of the score.

Aimard provides particularly valuable insight concerning the striking seventh movement of the set, which calls for a high degree of independence between the pianist's left and right hands. Ligeti makes use of a polytempo metrical structure in which the left hand performs a septuplet ostinato figure at 88 beats per minute underneath the right hand's *cantabile* melody at 116 beats per minute. (The use of this technique prefigures further prominent uses of multiple

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[19] Robert Busan, "György Ligeti's *Musica ricercata* and *Six Bagatelles* for Wind Quintet – A Study in Transcription or Recomposition?" (D.M.A. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2005), 10.

[20] Busan, "György Ligeti's *Musica ricercata* and *Six Bagatelles,*" 11.

[21] Stiftung Klavier-Festival Ruhr, "György Ligeti's Piano Works - Performing Ligeti," Explore the Score, http://www.explorethescore.org/gy%c3%b6rgy-ligeti-piano-works-performing-ligeti.html (accessed October 27, 2019).

perceived tempi in works such as *Automne à Varsovie*). Describing the separation of the parts/hands as "schizophrenic," in a score annotation video from a masterclass at the 2014 Aldeburgh Festival, Aimard calls for a dramatic separation of the mechanical, rhythmic ostinato from the free, singing, *cantabile* melody. He even characterizes the technique as a state where each hand truly inhabits its own disconnected musical "world," suggesting that the effect is that of two pianists playing conflicting patterns, with each ignorant of the other's figuration.[22]

Aimard also draws interesting connections between the left hand figuration in the seventh movement and the work of Ligeti's contemporaries. In remarking (in another score annotation video) on the tempo at which the left hand is to be played, Aimard advocates for a close agreement with the marked 88 beats per minute in order to achieve an ambiguous state where the figuration exists "almost between rhythm and dry texture."[23] Aimard states, "we have to choose the tempo that is between these categories. That's very important for [Ligeti] and for this generation of composer[s]. There are the musical parameters— rhythm, pitch, timbre, etc.— and we can work only in one category (isolate the categories) or play with the ambiguities between these categories."[24] In this statement, Aimard seems to refer to an affinity of compositional approach between Ligeti and composers such as Boulez and Stockhausen, (and perhaps most of all to the later composers of the "liminal" spectralist tradition for whom the ambiguity of musical parameters is of particular interest). It is especially noteworthy, then, that Ligeti was already exploring these compositional techniques of ambiguity in 1953 when he was still separated from the influence of composition in the West.

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[22] Stiftung Klavier-Festival Ruhr, "György Ligeti's Piano Works."
[23] Stiftung Klavier-Festival Ruhr, "György Ligeti's Piano Works."
[24] Stiftung Klavier-Festival Ruhr, "György Ligeti's Piano Works."

Speaking more generally about the intense virtuosity, emotional energy, and sheer physical force that Ligeti demands of the performer, Aimard states, "[Ligeti] had a relationship with borders, extremes that was very strong, and he wanted the interpreter on stage to be in danger. If he felt that— that one would give one hundred fifty percent and risk everything on stage— then he could be satisfied; otherwise, it was not enough."[25]

In this regard, the music of Ligeti is very similar to that of his countryman, György Kurtág. Both *Musica ricercata* and Kurtág's piano set *Játékok* are generated from simple, direct musical elements in a manner that follows the progression of Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*. Also like Ligeti, Kurtág is famous for his meticulous compositional process, fastidiously crafting each work or movement in a detailed manner reminiscent of the music Webern.[26] Due to their similarities of style, their shared nationality, and their common historical experiences, it may be instructive to compare Ligeti's intense compositional style with the extreme demands that Kurtág makes of those performing his pieces. Tom Service, writing on Kurtág in a retrospective for *The Guardian* states, "the detail of Kurtág's compositional imagination is matched by the inspirational and sometimes forbidding fastidiousness of… his coaching of his own music. His near-perennial state of dissatisfaction with performers is the stuff of legend among musicians, but so too is the brilliance of his insight and wisdom."[27]

This characterization of Kurtág's music bears a striking resemblance to Aimard's statement concerning the performer being "in danger" on stage due to the emotional intensity of *Musica ricercata.* It seems clear that performers ought to approach *Musica ricercata* with the

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[25] Stiftung Klavier-Festival Ruhr, "György Ligeti's Piano Works."

[26] William Kinderman, *The Creative Process in Music: From Mozart to Kurtág,* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 163.

[27] Tom Service, "A Guide to György Kurtág's Music," *The Guardian,* http://www.theguardian.com/music/tomserviceblog/2013/mar/12/contemporary-music-guide-gyorgy-kurtag (accessed November 22, 2019).

utmost interpretive urgency and earnestness. Though many of the early movements of *Musica ricercata* consist of the most sparse, basic musical structures, it is precisely *because of* their stripped-down musical language (in a style similar to that of Kurtág) that performers ought to focus on interpretive intensity and clarity all the more.

Aimard, in speaking of *Musica ricercata*, states the following: "[It's] very interesting in early pieces how we see already some landmarks of [Ligeti's personality]. We see in some cases how he's not completely himself, but we see in other moments how his strength is already here and we can anticipate how he will develop later."[28] In writing *Musica ricercata,* Ligeti began his career-long project of redefining the basic elements of his musical language. And throughout the work's eleven movements, one can track the slow construction of a new era in music history. While *Musica ricercata* has not shared the prominence that Ligeti's later works enjoy, it is an important contribution to the piano repertoire, and it is a work that deserves more attention for the role that it plays in foreshadowing Ligeti's development through the twentieth century.

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[28] Stiftung Klavier-Festival Ruhr, "György Ligeti's Piano Works."

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