

Ligeti's String Quartet Music: From the Published Works to the New Discoveries at the Paul Sacher Foundation

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Abstract: - Ligeti's profile as a composer is mostly defined by such works as *Apparitions*, *Atmosphères*, *Lontano*, *Requiem*, *Lux Aeterna*, *Kammerkonzert*, *Volumina*, *Etudes pour piano*, the Solo Concerti, *Continuum*, *Le Grand Macabre*, and so on. His music for string quartet is bracketed together and placed unfairly in a secondary position because the author enriched the genre with only three pieces, all of them mirroring his evolution concept during the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, documents stored at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel prove that Ligeti's interest for string quartet music was a constant preoccupation throughout his life; early sketches of string quartet exercises from the 1940s that preceded the *Andante and Allegretto* were found by the author of the present paper among the manuscripts of the Ligeti Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation, as well as late plans for two more String Quartets (Nos. 3 and 4), dating from between the 1980s and 2000. The two incomplete pieces show, according to Ligeti's own verbal sketches, a great affinity with extra-European folk music - a trait that characterises the composer's thinking during the last decades of his life and speak for themselves about the interplay of textural stylistic layers in his late music. They represent Ligeti's customary aesthetic attitude from the 1980s onward, promoting a new set of musical values, and demonstrating his continuous state of artistic regeneration.

Key-Words: - Ligeti, string quartet, manuscript, Paul Sacher Foundation

1 The Relevance of the String Quartet Music in Ligeti's Oeuvre

Ligeti: the composer renowned for his brilliant way of disturbing the clocks in music [1] and for inventing the "smoky organ" in *Volumina* [2]. Reasons enough for notable musicologists to enrich the literature about his oeuvre focusing mostly on works from the 1960s onward, and highlighting the pieces for orchestra, choir and orchestra, the solo concerti, the music for piano, organ and harpsichord. Relatively little research has been devoted to the music for String Quartet, and thus a significant part of his output has been ignored. Friedemann Sallis – a leading analyst of Ligeti's music, in his book *An introduction to the early works of György Ligeti* [3] refers to the piece *Andante and Allegretto* for String Quartet (written in 1950), as well as to *Métamorphoses nocturnes* (String Quartet No. 1, written in 1953-1954) hinting at the idea of illuminating an early stage in the composer's musical development. Hanspeter

Kyburz [4], Dora Cojocaru [5] and Richard Power [6] analyse the String Quartet no.2, acknowledging the piece as Ligeti's most outstanding chamber work of the 1960s. For composers such as Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, to Debussy, Ravel, Bartók, Shostakovich, Enescu and, more recently, Dutilleux and Crumb, the string quartet represented the most demanding of musical genres [7], not least because of the timbral restrictions imposed by four instruments belonging to the same acoustic family.

Ligeti's published string quartet pieces offer an accurate image of his compositional concept over the years, mirroring the different stages of his mastery spanning only two decades (the 1950s and 1960s). They chart, as if through the lens of a microscope, the broad stylistic development of his oeuvre during those years and give rise to the question of why such a prolific composer wrote only three pieces for string quartet during his life.

While *Andante and Allegretto*, written for the graduation exam at the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest demonstrated, according to the author himself, his own stylistic uncertainty [8],

Fig. 1

Andante und Allegretto
I. György Ligeti 1923

String Quartet No. 1 announced a distinctive new compositional voice by the mid-20th century. Despite its quality the piece has generated very little scholarly discussion. Springing from a Bartókian musical seed (which I identified as being a short excerpt from Bartók’s piano piece *Klänge der Nacht*), the work is built upon a sequence of intervallic progressions which generates strong inner coherence. The two ascending major seconds of the main motif (presented initially by the first violin), conjoined by a descending minor second, encrypts from the very beginning the constructive conflict between diatonicism and chromaticism that marks the discourse until the end. This diatonic–chromatic duality proves itself as the salient alchemical principle of the entire piece and evokes again the bartókian universe. Yet, the *coda* establishes a subtle idiomatic “link” towards titles of the following decades, such as *Glissandi*, *Apparitions* and *Atmosphères*. The innovation

coefficient is embodied by the novel *brouillage* effect (*glissandi* on the harmonics of the four instruments in a high register). It might be regarded as an irreversible process that leads directly to the meta-language of the sonorous fields and static blocks projected beyond any gravitational space.

Fig. 2

Ligeti – String Quartet No. 1

The String Quartet No. 2, as well as other pieces written during the same period, brings into relief the birth of a new 1960s aesthetic, after Ligeti’s visit to the Studio for Electronic Music in Cologne, where he associated with the cutting edge of avant-garde of contemporary music, Stockhausen and Boulez, among others. A new language and musical vocabulary defined his style and turned the String Quartet No. 2 into Ligeti’s most valued chamber work.

Fig. 3

String Quartet No. 2

The image displays two pages of a musical score, likely for a string quartet. The notation is dense and complex, featuring multiple staves with various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings. The score is divided into measures, with some measures containing multiple notes, suggesting a polyphonic or micro-polyphonic texture. There are some annotations in German at the bottom of the second page, such as "Calculus", "Wiederholungszeichen", and "gleich voraus/jetzt/daher".

The aforementioned pieces, placed in the context of the composer's oeuvre, are showing the fundamental kinship between works of different genres, both in substance and in symbolic resonance. Thus they invite us to establish a stylistic grouping of the works according to the musical features they have in common, and allow an overview of Ligeti's trajectory as a composer with a strong sense of his evolution over the decades, during the 1950s and the 60s.

2 New String Quartet Sketches at the Paul Sacher Foundation

The manuscripts stored at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel have proved a revelation in terms of Ligeti's earlier attempts at the form, and of his renewed interest in writing quartet music after the 1970s. From an early age, when he was still living in Cluj, Ligeti learnt to master traditional techniques, following the ground rules of Classical and Romantic syntax, morphology, harmony, and counterpoint. His exercises in string quartet style range from the Classics to the late Romantics and his notes demonstrate that he was studying intensely the masterpieces of world repertoire. Ligeti's sketchbooks [9] in the early 40s reveal that he was already studying salient items of the genre, such as Beethoven's F minor, op.95, Haydn's E flat major, Schubert's E flat major or Tchaikovsky's D major Quartets. Those years could be labelled as "the fast assimilation process" in which the author tried to take a crash course through all the stages of musical history, from early Haydn or Mozart as far as a more dissonant language, infused with a few chromatic elements [10]. It was the time at which he studied in Cluj with Farkas Ferenc, composing short stylistic exercises which clearly displayed a high level of inspiration and ingenuity in the young musician. Writing in 1973 a letter to Adam Horst

and intending to sketch a *Curriculum Vitae* as a composer, while he was referring to his early activity, as a teenager, Ligeti said that he had written "Dilettantische Kompositionen: Klavierstücke, mit 15 ein Streichquartett, mit 16 und 17 zwei Sätze einer Symphonie"[11].

For his graduation exam at the Franz Liszt Music Academy in Budapest he completed the *Andante and Allegretto* (1948-1950), a string quartet piece which anticipated and led, within a few years, to the outstanding String Quartet No. 1, regarded by many (including Ligeti's dear friend and esteemed colleague György Kurtág) as a Bartókian work. Kurtág stated that "Le premier quatuor à cordes, *Métamorphoses nocturnes*, vibre en moi comme s'il était le septième que Bartók n'a jamais écrit. Après les six quatuors de Bartók, cette oeuvre reste du moins pour longtemps la plus importante du genre qui ait été écrite en Hongrie" [12].

The author's contact with string quartet music does not end with his well-known "No. 2", a piece where Ligeti already displays a fine grasp of instrumental timbre and technique, and shows a much more advanced micropolyphonic layout. The composer himself writes in 1969 from Vienna to Dr. Yeshayahu Spira, Chairman of the Music Section at the National Council of Culture and Art in Tel Aviv describing the piece as one of his most striking achievements up to that time: "As chamber music the most representative work is the 2nd String Quartet (24', Schott), this piece is played by *LaSalle Quartet* (Cincinatti)" [13]. In the manuscripts held by the Paul Sacher Foundation one discovers a large amount of material with relevant verbal references only [14] regarding the projected emergence of a 3rd and a 4th String Quartet, the former of which was supposed to be premiered by the *Arditti Quartet*, the latter by *Kronos*.

3 String Quartets No. 3, No. 4, and Pieces of the Same Period in Ligeti's Music Catalogue

As Ligeti's richly revealing notebooks show, the project hatched in the composer's mind between the 1980s and 2000, a period during which he also planned to write other unfinished works (*Labyrinth*, *The Tempest* for the BBC, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*) and published some of the most noteworthy pieces (*Piano Etudes*, *Hamburgisches Konzert*, *Violin Concerto*). The two new chamber music works, unfortunately not completed, were probably triggered by the interest that both musicians and audience expressed in favour of

having more string quartets by Ligeti. A letter sent in the early 80s to Irvine Arditti by Dr. Vanek from Geneva, and then forwarded by Irvine Arditti to Ligeti, supports this hypothesis: “Un concert Ligeti I + II + (un 3e quatuor de Ligeti n'est-il pas en chantier pour vous? Que diriez-vous alors d'une création mondiale?)” [15]. Irvine Arditti himself, in a moving letter looking back in time and acknowledging the value of the special collaboration between Ligeti and the ensemble declares: “He is one of the few composers of our time who have been able to sustain and develop his style through many decades. /.../ I am still awaiting a long ago promise of his third string quartet, as well as every new piece that flows from his pen” [16].

4 Innovative Stylistic Hallmarks of the New, Unfinished String Quartets

Even in words, the new unwritten String Quartets, which would have been completely innovative, both in terms of music substance and structure, display the same features as the aforementioned titles, namely those of a wide stylistic fusion between different cultures and historical times. Just as Ligeti's String Quartet No. 1 echoes pieces like *Musica Ricercata* and *Sechs Bagatellen für Bläserquintett*, or just as String Quartet No. 2 matches stylistically with works of the same period, such as *Kammerkonzert* (in the fast movements) or *Lux aeterna* (in the slow movement), the verbal sketches of the String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4 exhibit the new stylistic concept of the author between the 1980's and 2000. In his most recent notes kept at the Paul Sacher Foundation [17], recovered from the artist's piano in Vienna right after his death (notes where Ligeti was still using the Hungarian language after so many years spent in Austria and Germany), the researcher can pick up the following musical ingredients: the composer collected ideas from Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* (String Quartet op. 130), Borodin's String Quartet No. 1, Janáček's String Quartet No. 2, the African polyrhythms that he employed intensively in his *Piano Etudes*, musical elements from Burma, Cameroon, Hungary, Romania (for example *Hora lungă*, a folk song brilliantly used in his *Viola Sonata*), providing references about the acoustic effects required (“pizzicato movement = Madagascar zithers” [18] or “Romanian folk string instruments” [19], “uneven tremolo, in a different vibrato speed” [20]) and about the language (“ultra chromatic”, “spectral”, “complex polyrhythm”) [21], aiming for an amazing musical crossover.

References to the music of the past are numerous and span from Perotin and Gesualdo to Schubert's G major String Quintet. But browsing the past during his mature years was not intended to restore outdated compositional methods; rather it was supposed to lay the foundations of the new techniques and musical substance he had in mind.

Ideas imported from the composers of previous times would have provided Ligeti with a fertile conceptual framework over which he would have added the novelty of music imbued with extra-European elements and charged with new meanings. Much richer in references than the String Quartet No. 4, String Quartet No. 3 opens up new perspectives about Ligeti's manner of continually reinventing himself as a composer. Commissioned by the prestigious *Festival d'Automne à Paris*, the piece passed through various stages of design configuration. First, it was meant to be written in one part (“one long movement with many episodes”) [22], recalling the form of *Métamorphoses nocturnes*, then it evolved into different forms, as a piece of six or of three movements, specifying also the duration of each one ($12' + 3' + 6' = 21'$). The musical language was also very well outlined in words: “entirely microtonal” [23], “microtonal flageolets” [24], “it disintegrates through the hyperchromaticism typical for Gesualdo” [25], completed with detailed information regarding each instrument on which string to play. Descriptions combining visual and acoustic elements of different music fragments are utterly relevant: “Gradually it evolves higher and higher (maybe the cello stays in a low register, on the C string, as a *BORDUN*), the others disappear irritated in the high register through high flageolets, as a lost plane” [26]. To all these characteristics, Ligeti sums up an abundant array of extra-European musical influences, of a wide geographical spread, stringing together rhythmic and melodic ideas from Burma, Uganda, Great Zimbabwe, Java-Bali, Cameroon etc. Moreover, he crosses the frontier of the music art by integrating into his verbal sketches references from the fine arts: “In Escher's footsteps” [27], “Pinturas negras” a reference to Goya's series of paintings, “Alhambra ornaments” [28], all these articulating the image of a complex personality of 20th century culture and poignantly leaving unanswered for posterity the question of what String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4 could have sounded like.

Ligeti's verbal plans for his new String Quartets, which would have been fully innovative, both in music substance and structure [29], are completely in keeping with the words of the Romanian composer Ștefan Niculescu, which I currently

discovered in a letter at the Paul Sacher Foundation; he wrote Ligeti the following lines [30], accurately describing his late composition style, after having received a recent CD of the Transylvanian-born composer, released in the early 90s. It is the period of time during which Ligeti was sketching his String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4, therefore Niculescu's words also apply to the aforementioned pieces of Ligeti's artistic lab: "I find here a completely new and paradoxical world, come as from eternity. A miracle of certain archetypes which you discovered inside yourself, but which can also be found, under totally different shapes, in the great traditional cultures of the world. Eternal, therefore timeless archetypes, and yet so significant - I would say 'redeeming' - for specifying and guiding today's *Zeitgeist*. I sense here, among other things, the seed of a new universal grammar or, as you put it, of a new 'tonality' which, I believe, has in your case planetary features".

References:

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- [7] See also Ligeti, György und Harald Kaufmann, *Wenn man heute ein Streichquartett schreibt/NMZ*, Schott's Sohne, Mainz, 1970/7, 8.
- [8] Booklet notes to the CD *György Ligeti Edition – 1*, Sony Classical, 1996, SK 62306, p. 11.
- [9] *Skizzenheft 3* (1940), Ligeti collection, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel.
- [10] *Skizzenheft 9 and 10* (1943-1944), Ligeti collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.
- [11] "Dilettant compositions: piano pieces, at 15 a String Quartet, at 16 and at 17 two movements of a Symphony". Letter from György Ligeti to Adam Horst, January 1973, Ligeti collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.
- [12] "The first String Quartet, *Métamorphoses nocturnes*, resonates inside me as if it were the no.7 Bartók never completed. After the six String Quartets by Bartók, this work stays at least for a long time the most significant genre piece written in Hungary", *György Kurtág. Entretiens, textes, dessins (Trois entretiens avec Bálint András Varga. Deux hommages à György Ligeti. Autres textes)*, Genève, Contrechamps Editions, 2009, p. 171.
- [13] Letter from György Ligeti to Dr. Y. Spira, August 17, 1969, Ligeti collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.
- [14] *Skizzenbuch (um 1995)* and *Skizzenbuch Alice in Wonderland*, Ligeti collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.
- [15] "A Ligeti concert I + II ... (a 3rd Quartet is there in the making for you? What would you say about a world premiere?". Letter from Prof. Vanek to Irvine Arditti, March 15, 1981, Ligeti collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.
- [16] Undated letter, Arditti collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.
- [17] *Skizzenbuch (um 1995)*, Ligeti collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.
- [18] Original, in Hungarian: "Pizz tétel = Madagascar Cythères".
- [19] "Román népi vanosok".
- [20] "Lebegések visznek hangmagaság-fluktuációkhoz".
- [21] "Ultrakromatikus", "spectral", "complex poliritm").
- [22] "Egy hosszú tételben sok epizód".
- [23] "Egész Mikrotonális".
- [24] "Üveghang mikrotonális".
- [25] "Gesualdo szerüen hiperkromatikusán széthúzódik".
- [26] "Fakozatosan elmozdul mind magassabra (esetleg Vc lent marad C-húron, mint BORDUN), a többiek üveghangokban magas szövetekben, irítálva eltűnnek a magasban, mint egy elveszett repülőgép".
- [27] "Metamorfózisok Escher nyomán".
- [28] "Alhambra ornamentika".
- [29] At the top of one manuscript page dedicated to the String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4 (*Skizzenbuch, um 1995*), Ligeti writes the Hungarian title "Radikális új" ("Radically new").
- [30] Letter from the Romanian composer Ștefan Niculescu, March 24, 1993, Ligeti collection,

Paul Sacher Foundation: “Găsesc aici o lume absolut nouă și, paradoxal, venită parcă din eternitate. Un miracol al unor arhetipuri, pe care le-ați descoperit în Dvs., dar care pot fi întâlnite, sub cu totul alte forme, și în marile culturi tradiționale ale lumii, arhetipuri eterne, deci fără

timp, și totuși atât de semnificative - aș spune de salvatoare - pentru precizarea și orientarea Zeitgesit-ului de astăzi. Eu simt aici, printre altele, germeii unei noi gramatici universale sau, cum spuneți Dvs., ai unei noi ‘tonalități’, care, cred, are la Dvs. caracteristici planetare”.