

# 1

## Troubled Beginnings

György Ligeti was one of the most fascinating artists to emerge from Hungary in the twentieth century. He was a Hungarian Jew born in Dicsôszentmárton (Transylvania, now in Romania) in 1923. He had a tragic early life, taken to a forced labour camp by the Nazis at the age of twenty, whilst both his father and brother were killed in the Bergen Belsen and Mathausen concentration camps during the Second World War. György was lucky to survive, escaping from the Nazis when he worked transporting heavy munitions to the front line. He deserted and walked to the Russian occupied Transylvania.

He subsequently studied music at the Budapest Academy where he met and befriended György Kurtág who was also to become a successful composer. They had both gone to Budapest to study composition with Béla Bartók, but unfortunately he died around the same time. Ligeti's early music is strongly influenced by folk music, Bartók, and Zoltán Kodály, but he had problems with the censorship of some of his more advanced music, like his String Quartet No. 1. Several of his works from the 1950s were written 'for the drawer' and weren't performed for many years due to the regressive Soviet regime in Hungary at the time.

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# 2

## Escape to the West

During the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, Ligeti was listening to music broadcast from the West such as Stockhausen's electronic work *Gesang der Jünglinge*. As Ligeti recalled: "Everyone was down in the cellars, but I went up so that I could hear the music clearly. There were detonations going on, and shrapnel, so it was quite dangerous to be listening."

In December 1956, Ligeti escaped Hungary with his wife Vera, avoiding the Soviet army by hiding under mail bags in a train. They continued on foot, at night, through the mud of no-man's land to Austria. The move to the West had a radical effect on Ligeti's subsequent music, and he reinvented himself as an avant-garde composer with a particular focus on textural composition. The sudden release of the Soviet artistic strictures he had been composing under caused an outpouring of new and imaginative music in the late 1950s and 1960s.

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## A New Language

Ligeti moved to Cologne where he met the composers Karlheinz Stockhausen and Herbert Eimert, the latter of whom helped him get a scholarship to work in the West German Radio Studio. Here he produced two inventive electronic pieces; *Artikulation* and *Glissandi* which were quite unlike his work written in Hungary. *Artikulation* attempts to create a new verbal language through the use of synthesised tones. At times it sounds rather like aliens communicating with each other – at others it's quite humorous, like the soundtrack to a surreal cartoon. He started a third electronic work, using harmonics and combination tones, which was never finished because of the complexity of its 48 sonic layers. However, this concept of layering a dense texture influenced Ligeti's later music for orchestra, which is reminiscent of electronic sounds - he was using the orchestra like a giant synthesiser.

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## Controversy: Ligeti and Kubrick

Ligeti's music was extensively used in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) including the vocal work *Lux Aeterna* (1966) and the Kyrie from his *Requiem* (1961-2). Ligeti claimed that he didn't get paid for the use of his music and tried to sue Warner Brothers, settling for \$3,500 after six years of wrangling. However, it has recently been discovered that Ligeti's publishers had agreed to the use of his music, they just hadn't told him! The contracts describe the music as being 'background music', whereas in fact his works are a significant and integral artistic part of the film. As director Stanley Kubrick said, he wanted music "that sounded unusual and distinctive but not so unusual as to be distracting." Whilst Ligeti may not have been justly compensated for the use of his music, the film did bring his work great attention, and Kubrick went on to use his music again in *The Shining* (1979) and *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999).

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## Spider's Webs and Micropolyphony

Ligeti's most characteristic music, composed in the 1960s and 1970s, focused on texture and orchestral tone colour. The textures often use a technique called micropolyphony which consists of many layers of melodies with the same note pattern but slightly different rhythms – all the layers are staggered. Although this music is very complex, there is a clear shape to it, which means the listener can follow the music's ebb and flow. He has talked about how this textural music relates to a dream he had as a small child in which he “was caught up in this immense web together with both living things and objects of various kinds – huge moths, a variety of beetles...an indescribable sadness hung over these shifting forms.” Ligeti's music in the later 1960s became more melodic and its harmony more defined; his Chamber Concerto (1969-70) is a good example of this change of style and is one of his most seminal and vivid works.

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## Altered Time: Clocks and Clouds

One of Ligeti's recurring styles is his *meccanico* music in which the instruments imitate the ticking of clocks – all at different speeds. He has talked about the influence reading a short story by Gyula Krudy as a five-year-old had on his music, in which a widow lived in a house full of clocks ticking away all the time. He also liked the idea of machines breaking down: “recalcitrant machinery, unmanageable automata have always fascinated me.”

The most extreme version of his *meccanico* music is *Poème Symphonique* (1962), composed for 100 metronomes, which you will hear tonight. The metronomes are all set going at the same time at different speeds and gradually stop once they have run-down. The resulting sound at the beginning is cloud-like as the ticks merge together, but later individual metronomes become increasingly audible; thus clouds gradually emerge as clocks. Later Ligeti composed a work with the title *Clocks and Clouds* (1972-3) for 12-part women's chorus and orchestra. This uses the title of Karl Popper's lecture 'Of Clouds and Clocks' which interested Ligeti in its discussion of two contrasting processes in nature – ones you can measure precisely and ones which can only have a statistical approximation. These became the clocks and clouds of Ligeti's composition.

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## Back to Melody and Myriad Influences

In Ligeti's works of the later 1960s and early 1970s such as *Ten Pieces for Wind Quintet* (1968) and *Melodien* (1971) you can hear a new approach in which he starts to reintroduce melody into his musical language. The melodies are quite angular and extreme but it is a significant change from his textural work. In his work from the 1980s onwards his music becomes ever more post-modern, taking influences from all kinds of sources such as music of Sub-Saharan Africa, the player-piano works of Conlon Nancarrow, and the use of fractals. Where Ligeti's music had been quite restrained in the 1960s it became much more flamboyant and rich in scope. His most successful works in this period were the Piano Concerto (1980-88) and the Violin Concerto (1989-93); the latter makes use of blatantly tonal melodies but also a bizarre ocarina quartet. His final major work was the Hamburg Concerto (1999 rev. 2002) which both looks to the past but also explores new ideas through the use of natural horns and their strange other-worldly harmonics. Ligeti was not just concerned with music; he was also interested in science, mathematics and art. His later music aptly demonstrates this curiosity and invention.

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## Opera and Stylistic Crisis

Ligeti's only opera *Le Grand Macabre* (1974-77) is a farcical depiction of the end of the world. Its cast of strange and exotic characters includes; Piet the Pot (the common man, a drunkard and narrator); Nekrotzar (the angel of death or the Grand Macabre); and Astradamors (an astronomer with a penchant for bondage). It is one of the few modern operas which makes audiences laugh out loud, and is influenced by Ligeti's experience of the Hungarian totalitarian state and its Kafkaesque absurdities. The musical style is much more conventional than his earlier music, enabling the narrative to take centre stage. Ligeti's musical style was permanently transformed after this work. It may be he was also influenced by his composition students at the Hamburg Hochschule für Musik where he taught from 1973-1989. He complained about their conservatism and their desire to go back to the past in their music – ironically a trait his own music began to show. After he composed the opera, Ligeti found it very difficult to write – he couldn't go back to writing micropolyphony and he struggled to move forward, until he wrote his Horn Trio in 1982, which shows post-modernist influences of the Romantic period.

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