

Kylwyría – Kálvária On György Ligeti

György Kurtág (2007)



Obituary, speech of mourning? For me he's more alive than ever. For months my small study in St. André has been filled with his compositions, writings and speeches, with essays, articles and commemorative texts about him. Again and again I read the scores and listen to all the recordings I can get my hands on.

In front of me is his life's work – perhaps even his life.

No end of things I'd like to tell him, including what I've finally understood about his music after decades. Perhaps there are correlations that only I've discovered now. So many things I'd like to ask. Sometimes his later works give answers, but other times it seems hopeless because he's not here to explain them.

I'd like to find out how you too might have known him.

I must summon the help of those better equipped than me to portray him.

“You had to hear him speak, if possible see him,” writes Wolfgang Sandner (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 17 June 2006), referring to Ligeti’s lively, expressive gestures. “He was a master of the rare art of linguistic polyphony. Anyone lucky enough to experience his wonderful way of expressing himself could understand his music far better afterwards. Because his language bore a striking congruence to his scores. The same lively, bustling sound configurations, the richness of associations, the far-fetched lightness of touch that nevertheless grew in some magical way into a complex linguistic architecture. Ligeti was a gesamtkunstwerk.”

A recollection written by neurobiologist Gerhard Neuweiler, Ligeti’s closest friend during the last six years of his life:

“He began asking me what I was doing at the moment. ... He questioned, and I answered, he probed, and I responded, he bored deeper and deeper..., he was like a volcano, always spewing new ideas, stimulations, doubts, questions... He forced me to reflect and inquire more closely, and through his inquisitorial curiosity he led me into new and unexpected aspects of my own discipline.”

In my own private mythology I ascribe this kind of probing to the Socrates-Ligeti.

Yes, that curiosity!

Now I quote his words from 1993:

“As different as the criteria for art and science are, they are similar in that those who work in them are driven by curiosity. The key thing in both areas is to investigate coherences still undiscovered by others, and to create structures that haven’t existed until now.”

This “insatiable curiosity, the euphoria of discovering and understanding, the breathtaking speed of thought,” as Hungarian composer László Vidovszky put it, which characterised the heights of the Renaissance, this never-being-content with what you’ve achieved, always on the lookout for new ways of expression...

At the same time, the true Ligetian poiesis emerges from the experiences of musical history from Machaut to today.

Much has been written about how he profited from folklore research (that of Briloiu, Kubik, Simha Arom and of course, again and again, Bartók), but it seems that even he forgot that it was the young Ligeti (1950–53) who revealed in a seminal essay the functioning and harmonising patterns of Romanian folk orchestras.

For him, “the sciences were also a true source of inspiration” (Vidovszky). With Marina Lobanova he spoke about the “paradoxes and beauties of the mathematical way of thinking...”.

And literature, the arts ...

From Heinrich von Kleist to Gyula Krúdy, from Proust to Weöres, Hölderlin and Kafka, Shakespeare and Lewis Carroll, the Joyce of Finnegans Wake, from Beckett and Ionesco to the Borges of Labyrinths, from Bosch to Piranesi, from Cézanne to Miró and Escher – so much is reflected in this music!

We met and became friends sixty-two years ago. In the first days of September in 1945, the entrance exam for the composition class at the Budapest Academy of Music changed my life forever. We waited to be called. At the same time I flipped through his scores, and saw how far above me his knowledge, maturity and musical fantasy put him.

I hooked up with him for life. Until 1956, as long as he lived in Budapest, we were bound by a close friendship. I had the privilege of witnessing the creation of his works, and participating in his life. I was there when he met Vera, and best man at their wedding in 1952.

I see his life as a single entity, his oeuvre as endlessly ramified, held together

by LOYALTY, fidelity. Above all to childhood.

a) His early childhood Urtraum: motionless textural blocks transform gradually and imperceptibly, squirming and writhing from inside, on the verge of building musical structures. For decades this will be one of his fundamental musical typologies, appearing in its purest form in the immense chromatic clusters and micropolyphonic meshes of his *Atmosphères*. Then later in the beseeching voice fascicles of the Kyrie fugue in *Requiem* (1962–1965), unapproachable in its perfection.

b) *Kylwyria*, his imaginary country, which he built up between the ages of five and thirteen. He drew colourful orohydrographic maps which could pass for Miró paintings, invented the *Kylwyrian* language and grammar, geography and history, describing in naive Utopian terms *Kylwyria's* legal and social systems.

Out of *Kylwyria* come his *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures* (1962–1965). They articulate his second fundamental musical typology: abundant humour, dramatic twists and turns, unexpected tremorous flashes and equally - unexpected moments of pause, aggression and apprehension. The three singers develop very human relationships on the basis of non-existent phonetic (*Super-Kylwyrian*!?) linguistic material. His intention was to unite the two *Aventures* in a single opera entitled *Kylwyria*. Happily, *Le Grand Macabre* was born instead!

Equally, in the *Dies Irae* of the *Requiem* a Medieval sequence of images unfurls from desperation to anxiety, from the tragic to the grotesque, as if intoning the flash point of a “*Last Judgement*” by Hieronymus Bosch or Hans Memling.

c) Sometime in his childhood he read the novella by Gyula Krúdy about an old widow whose apartment is bathed in twilight and stuffed full of antique clocks which beat confused, irregular time, creating a unique atmosphere. From this childhood memory and his experience with the *Poème symphonique* for 100 metronomes, Ligeti developed a new type of scherzo whose tempo and character notations already disclose much: *Come un meccanismo die precisione* (*String quartet No. 2, III*) or *Movimento preciso e meccanico* (*Chamber Concerto III*).

The 1962 world premiere of the *Poème symphonique* for 100 – mechanical – metronomes was a scandal. The title, harking back to the heyday of Romanticism, together with the mechanically oscillating metronomes was like a provocation, an attempt to “*épater le bourgeois*”.

But later concerts showed the sheer poetry of the piece over and above its daring novelty. At first the metronomes, all set at different speeds and set in motion at the same time, build an impermeable mesh of sound. But then the structure becomes increasingly clear as the quickest machines run to a halt. The beats of the two slowest, the two “soloists” remaining at the end, are like a moving, lyrical farewell.

The last minutes. Vera and Lukas are by his side. His breathing slows, halts, starts again, becomes even slower. Lukas: “Like the end of the metronome piece.” ... the breathing slows even more and then... – stops.

On the afternoon concert on the day of the funeral service the Poème symphonique. Astounding, tragic, Beckett-like.



Excerpt from: György Kurtág “Drei Gespräche mit Bálint András Varga und Ligeti-Hommagen”
© Bálint András Varga and György Kurtág
Translated by John Lambert