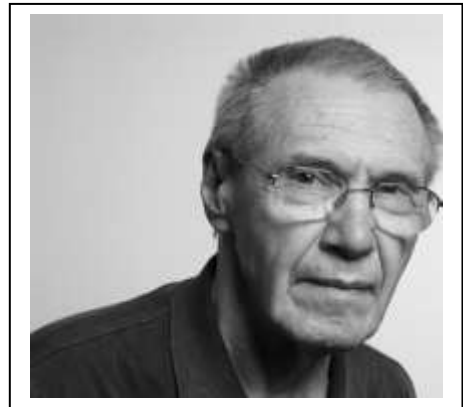


LAUDATIO TO GYÖRGY LIGETI

GYÖRGY KURTÁG



Dear György Ligeti!
Honored Ladies and Gentlemen!

How can one speak, when one is not a master of words? How can I evoke scenes of the times I spent together with Ligeti, without having a minimum of eloquence to connect my narrative with what happened before and after?

If I could compose my memories as I compose music, I would have to tell them simultaneously - the main thread – as if on a podium – in the middle – and to imagine – the previous events - for example: Ligeti's earliest experiences, that I only know from his or other people's descriptions – let's say – high up - in one of the back corners – the consequences of the central events somewhere at the side or in the top centre; and a series of merely illuminating incidents over the course of several years - so to speak – all around us.

So – the first scene – (central – on the podium):

Christmas Eve 1957 - according to the telegram that I still have, at 11:02 p.m. - Paris - North Station. Ligeti arrives in Paris for the first time in his life. I am waiting for him at the station. The pianist György Szoltsányi, my friend and our host that evening, finds it strange that someone would be in the mood to travel so late, on Christmas Eve. He invites Ligeti as well at 48 Garibaldi Boulevard.

– The metro is still running – I say.

– No, let us walk!

And so, without hesitation, he leads me through the streets of Paris, I who have lived here for over six months – knowing by name every street and intersection.

(back corner – top – left)

Ligeti's childhood. His obsessive pastime: perusing maps and memorizing them by heart - including the plan of his dream city: Paris - while already working on his fictional country, Kylwyrria.

(front – top – right):

Apparently, the spirit of creating the Kylwyrria is hereditary - at an equally young age, his son Lukas spent years writing the encyclopaedia of his invented planet, illustrated with examples from its scientific history, literature, fine arts and music.

(front – top – left):

The musical examples from this encyclopaedia will later form an important starting point for my *Games* for piano - (and now the summary – all around us): for a long time, for a lifetime, Ligeti led me onward. No, I must correct myself: I followed him - sometimes right behind him - sometimes years or even decades later. I call it my "Imitatio Christi" syndrome. The early years of our friendship were marked not only by his intellectual leadership. Even without being directly influenced, I molded my taste - even some steps in my private life - after his example.

(Podium – central):

Budapest Music Academy, twelve years earlier - early September, 1945. Entrance examination for the composition class. A very serious looking, friendly albeit distant young man, perhaps distant also because of his glasses, is sitting next to me. He looks older than me, but as I flip through the pages of his compositions, I find out that he is one generation older. Among them I see choral works, probably also the second Cantata. From the Latin text I assume not very logically that he is a Calvinist theologian. There are also instrumental pieces, and I can see, or rather I can feel intuitively, that they are no student compositions. They create a self-contained, mature world, governed by a striking order in the note texture. My feeling: I have met a master.

(still on the podium – in the centre):

Early July, 1958. Now I am the one who arrives, and he is the one waiting for me at the station in Cologne. He talks about Stockhausen's new composition on the way to the hotel and then straight on to the radio station, where I would listen to the recordings over the next two days: *Groups* for three orchestras, with three conductors, and about its Alban Berg-like violin cadences and the dramatic passage with the fiercely clashing brass instruments. These are the fragments that strike me most vividly when I hear the *Groups* in Stockhausen's presence. I am deeply overwhelmed by the new work *Articulations*. I experience this work as Ligeti's first true work – marked by a density of events, a directness in its statement and a fine balance between humor and tragedy that were unparalleled even by his following works.

(top – back - right):

I speak of my impressions of those days, and not of the absolute value of the compositions. But this comparison echoed in my mind even later: *Articulations – Atmosphères* - absolute masterpieces for me – represented two basic aspects of Ligeti's work, while *Apparitions* seemed to me rather a stage on the road thereto.

(top – front - left):

Today I understand *Apparitions* entirely differently, but my heart nevertheless remains with *Articulations – Atmospheres*.

(top - front – right):

After my return to Hungary – we would not see each other for the following ten years - I began my new life with Op. 1. My ideal and my aspiration were to formulate in my own

language something similar to what I had experienced in Cologne, listening to the *Articulations*.

(top - back - left):

He wrote me in Paris: "You must definitely get to know the studio in Cologne, before you return to Hungary" - knowing how difficult it would be for me to leave the country again. These two days were indeed for me, musically speaking, far richer and more important than the entire year spent in Paris. And I totally failed to notice that he, who had earned almost nothing for years, made considerable sacrifices to cover the costs of my stay

(podium – central):

1946-47 Budapest, 95 Szondy St.

For five years I lived here with my wife Márta at my aunt's place, in the servants' room next to the kitchen, crawling with cockroaches at night. The room was 4 meters long and 2 meters wide.

(top – left - back):

Problems with the passport again. From June 1947 to January 1948 we couldn't return from our summer holiday in Romania. It was then that Ligeti lived in this room for a while.

(centre):

Gradually it becomes a kind of ritual for us to have a musical evening at our place every Sunday. We sing mostly parts from Mozart operas. Márta sings all the female roles, Ligeti the tenor and sometimes the baritone, too. Our friend, composer Franz Sulyok, who studied composition with us, sings the bass roles. I play the orchestral part on the piano.

(top – back – right):

Ligeti repeats with us the tradition of the musical evenings with his circle of friends in Cluj.

(centre):

He tells us about *Così fan tutte* (I hadn't even heard of this opera before). One of the first examples that he analyzes dramaturgically and then sings for us in an adorably funny – yet serious – manner is the duet from the second act: *Il core vi dono, bell'idolo mio* (Dorabella - Guglielmo). Without transgressing the stylistic boundaries, his slightly exaggerated gestures had the boldness and qualities that we see today in his speeches, when he describes fragments from *Aventures* or from the *Requiem*, drawing them in the air.

Back then we used to sing even Mozart's Italian operas in German. Maybe because the piano parts were printed more legibly, or because the "noblesse oblige" was not yet asking us to sing in the original language of the composition. At least not in Budapest. We will never forget the way he played that special part – "You little rogue" from the role of the disguised Guglielmo, or the lyrical humor in "here it beats tic-tic", or again, on an entirely different note, the exaggerated *espressivo* of the beginning - an unprecedented wealth of moods coming from the same source. We have similar memories about *Don Giovanni* – Zerlina's duet, or about the trio between Pamina, Tamino and Sarastro (with Franz Sulyok performing gravely „Time has come”) – or about the duet between Susanna and the Count. Or the scene when Cherubino is unmasked, the trio in the first act, where he was playing the Count, and Basilio's reply: "What I said – about the page – was only my suspicion" etc. We used to sing *Figaro*, *The Magic Flute*, *Don Giovanni*, and sometimes even the *Abduction*, entirely.

Among Márta's notes I found something that was new and unknown even to Ligeti: the fragment from J. S. Bach's *Wedding Quodlibet*. It was a huge surprise for us to find the folkloric-trivial melodic line and the improvisatory verses reminiscent of "Les Noces", Bach's absurd humor. Ligeti found his way fast to the composition and took over the direction - his overly sentimental performance has become a family legend:

„O ihr Gedanken,
warum quälet ihr
meinen ?
Backtrog!”¹

(dryly, like a ventriloquist):
and continually varying the repetitions...
Reading today the verses of the *Quodlibet*:

„Große Hochzeit, große Freude
Großer Degen, große Scheide”²

later:

„Große Nasen, große Löcher”³

and elsewhere

„Pantagruel war ein sehr lustiger Mann”⁴

they seem to me reminiscent of *Le Grand Macabre*, not very far from the final lines in Act I

„Feuerblume sprieße mohnrot!
Lieben wir uns bis der Tod droht!”⁵

(I enjoy repeating these rhymes:

...mohnrot
Tod droht

and in Hungarian: drótostót)

(corner – left – top – back):

1949 - Tavaszi Virág (Spring Flower), Chinese tale.

I received a book of texts from the Budapest puppet theatre, to put to music. In my opinion, they are totally tasteless and primitive lyrics. There is nothing I can get out of them. Before returning it, Márta and I show it to Ligeti – out of amusement for the clumsy rhymes put together in the style of the craftsmen from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

(I read the verses in Hungarian):

¹ Oh, thoughts/ why are you torturing/ my spirit? / Trough!”

² “Great wedding, great joy / Large sword, large sheath”

³ “Big noses, big holes”

⁴ „Big noses, big holes”

⁵ “Fire flower rises red as poppy! / Let us love ourselves until the threat of death is upon us !”

Öröm lenne mindenestül
Minekünk a munka
Ha a császár a Vén Tigris
Nem ülne nyakunkba.⁶

To our surprise, Ligeti is interested and takes the book. A brilliant music is thus born, with hits that live on to this day in our circle. The spirit of these little verses found a perfect dramatic function in *Grand Macabre*.

The song of the Tortoise
Vigan úszik mint a hal
Apró lábacskaival
Ez az öreg teknős.⁷

Teknős = tortoise in German – but also trough – Backtrog!

(corner – back – right – top):

Paris, New Year's Eve 1957-58.

A café restaurant near the Comédie Française, overlooking Avenue de l'Opéra. We sit in the café with Franz Sulyok. Midnight - crazy honks concert - Parisian tradition. Ligeti gets up and out, and listens enthusiastically and lost for words.

(top – front – left):

Veröce, May 1993.

We listen to the recording of *Grand Macabre*. Márta makes the following remark about the honking overture: “As if it were the song of the tortoise from the puppet theatre”.

Two scenes:

a) 1948-49 Opera House, Budapest.

The composition students have free passes to the lodge on the third floor. Chopin's Study in E-sharp minor is orchestrated in a tasteless sweet way, performed tastelessly and sweetly on the cello, accompanying a kitschy Pas de Deux with a Traviata-like, consumptive, dying girl. Ligeti and Carl Melles, a student in the conducting class, whistle and shout outraged that something like that is possible after Mozart, Verdi, Bartók, Stravinsky. The police intervene, take them both outside and revoke their passes.

b) 1981 (?) Paris Opera House

our son was there: Ligeti shouts: „Arretez!” Stop – I am the composer – and leaves the hall in an uproar – the police don't intervene – *Grand macabre* continues.

(Centre): 1946-47

Budapest-Óbuda – Zsigmond Square area

At that time, the old houses were still standing, which Krúdy, Ligeti's favourite writer, described with such nostalgia. Krúdy himself lived in this neighbourhood. Ligeti rents a room here, the landlord is rather unfriendly, so it's better for visitors to come in through the window. A strange house with a crazy architecture, built on a slope. Although the room is

⁶ Work would be / All joy and pleasure / If the Old Tiger King / Were not breathing down our necks /

⁷ Like a fish happily swims / With its small paws / The old tortoise

above the main entrance, on a raised ground floor, its window is lower than the street level. Escher perspective.

Our first meetings, even before the evenings at 95 Szondi St. Here he tells us about Sándor Weöres' poetry – I had never heard of that name before. Then he plays two short Weöres songs, which to this day seem to me the peak of his creative work at the time. Not a promise of things to come, but self-contained works of great inner truth.

The wafting fairy-like Boticelli eroticism of the first song (Táncol a hold – The Moon Is Dancing) and the gesticulating anguished drama of the second (Kalmár jött nagy madarakkal – A Peddler Came with Large Birds), once more mark two basic aspects of Ligeti's work. Up to this day, they have been the starting points for my own song compositions.

Strangely, at that time we knew nothing of the third song – *Gyümölcsfürt* (A Cluster of Fruit). Something still amazes me: Although he had never heard Japanese music, he invented this Koto music!

(top - back - left): Ligeti: childhood memories

Two pictures of Japanese Geishas hang over his aunt's piano. He improvises notes on the black keys while looking up at them, unaware that in doing so he had found his way to Asian pentatony.

Shards of Thought – Scraps of Memory

a) 1946, 95 Szondi St. -

„Do you have colored dreams?
I do” – he says.
- We don't.

b) 1946 Óbuda:

Ligeti: „Two books of the utmost importance to me:
Proust: *À la recherche du temps perdu*
Freud: *Totem und Tabu*”.

c) 1993 – Conversation with Bálint Varga, on his birthday:

Ligeti: “ I am just reading two of the world's most beautiful books:
Proust: *à la recherche...* for the first time in the original and
What is Mathematics by Courant and Robbins”

d) Proust:

Un homme qui dort tient en cercle autour de lui le fil des heures, l'ordre des années et des mondes.⁸

Imaginary conversation:

Ligeti: „**l'ordre** et le **désordre**”.⁹

Me: „et enfin - chez toi - **l'ordre supérieur** qui les unit”.¹⁰

⁸ When a man is asleep, he has in a circle round him the chain of the hours, the sequence of the years, the order of the heavenly host.

⁹ “order and disorder”

¹⁰ “and finally - with you – the higher order that unites them”.

e) Vienna, Himmelhofgasse 34 - late 1980s: Ligeti: “Lately I have been able to listen only to music imbued with spirit, which causes mental exertion. (Everything occult-Buddhist, if **not** musically structured, I foreign to me”.)

f) **His study:** Budapest, 4 Alkotmány St., early 1950s – already married to Vera. Sharpened pencils are arranged neatly in small clay jars. On the black music rack of his piano is a magical incantation symbol of red wax - reminiscent of Rembrandt’s *Doctor Faustus* etching.

g) Berlin, 1971.

He works on the orchestral piece *Melodien*.

Ligeti: „ ... now I know exactly what *Melodien* will be like. I’ve just finished the framework of the harmonies.”

h) In 1947 he writes an essay for Professor Szabolcsi’s course in music history. We are free to choose any topic we please on Beethoven’s quartets. Ligeti: “I’ve chosen the first movement of Opus 18 in F Major, because the whole thing develops out of an almost insignificant germ motif. Yes, Szabolcsi’s courses...”

The nonacademic element in his teaching. No exams, just one short essay each semester on a topic of our choice. We discuss the history of music, but also cultural history, history in general. And how Szabolcsi talked of Mozart’s operas! And there was an optional Bartók seminar where Szabolcsi just commented. Here Lendvai read out his first analyses of Bartók’s music, and here we heard Ligeti’s analysis of Bartók’s *Bear Dance*.

i) 28 May, 1993. Népszabadság. Musicologist János Breuer remembers Ligeti’s courses at the Academy in the 1950s: “Everything became so clear as soon as he touched it, at the same time he showed the complexity of Bartók’s seemingly simple structures”.

My Treasure Chamber

1947 Budapest, Music Academy.

a) Ligeti’s speech on J. S. Bach’s two-part *Inventions*. I illustrate the basic types on the piano according to Ligeti’s selection.

Themes – and variously structured sequences resulting from them. Finally: interior or final cadences that become so general that they could result from any theme at all. (And, of course, a plan of the modulations). And that is the entire formal development. Everyone who was there – including myself – understood for a lifetime.

b) Hungarian folk music was compulsory for all the students of the Music Academy. Kodály was very strict while teaching and examining, but he explained little. Ligeti explained to Márta and me the main types of Hungarian folk song: six, seven or eight syllables (and their derivatives), and how you can recognize them by their cadence rhythms.

c) At the time it was unfathomable to me how in analyzing the *Bear Dance* he could hit upon the very simple solution that the melody lies in the middle voice of the chord mixture.

d) Ligeti collected folk music for several weeks in Romania. He was the first to discover and describe in a short essay the laws underlying the harmonies of Romanian village bands.

Among my treasures are two texts about Ligeti that I wrote down at the time of *Apparitions-Atmosphères*.

e) (I call it his early *Ars Poetica*)

Sounds and musical contexts always awaken in me the sensation of colour, form, material shape. Involuntarily I can't help associating even abstract concepts with sonorous ones. This explains the presence of so many "extra-musical" traits in my compositions.

Jingling surfaces and masses that displace, interpenetrate, and resolve into each other – floating networks that rip and tangle - wet, sticky, gelatinous, fibrous, dry, brittle, grainy and compact materials, shreds, scraps, splinters, and traces of all kinds – imaginary buildings, labyrinths, inscriptions, texts, dialogues, insects, states, events, procedures, fusions, metamorphoses, catastrophes, dissolutions, disappearances – all of these are elements of this nonpuristic music.

f) (I call this his primordial dream)

"In my early childhood I once dreamed that I wasn't able to make it as far as my crib (which represented a safe haven) because the room was filled with a thin-fibered, dense and extremely intricate web. Apart from me, other beings and objects also hung in the huge network, moths and beetles, huge damp, dirty cushions. Every movement of the creatures caught in the web caused the entire system to tremble. Now and then the movements were so strong that the web ripped in places and several beetles were set free, only to stray once more into the billowy undulant meshwork. These incidents gradually changed the structure of the web: inextricable knots formed in some places, other bits developed into caverns where isolated shreds floated about. The metamorphoses of the system were irreversible, no past state could be restored.

There was something inexpressibly sad about this process, the hopelessness of the fleeting time and a past that could never be retrieved.

If I knew nothing about this dream, I would set it to music. But as he has long been setting this dream to tones – and what tones! - and not just to tones, but to corresponding musical webs, I would never venture to touch it.

g) In the Vienna Standard of May 28, 1933, Wolfgang Fuhrmann wrote about Ligeti and his „**criminalistically exact analysis** of some of Pierre Boulez's key works." (Truly, the analysis of *Structure Ia* is formulated in such a way that anyone who reads and understands it could write down the entire composition).

His entire oeuvre is "criminalistically exact" – a lifelong development of his primordial dream - finding the means with which he can control it in each and every detail, to render it ever more complex.

The *Piano Studies* and the *Concertos* for piano and violin rise to heights that my limited intellect can hardly follow.

Yes, in the first year of our friendship I declared myself his pupil. He helped me very, very much, but never accepted me as his pupil. Márta recently explained to me that Ligeti

unconsciously felt that I could never be a real partner for him. I never understood a thing about mathematics, I was full of enthusiasm for everything that was big and beautiful, but my understanding never reached very far and my attitude to music and art is reminiscent of the ruddy-featured character Tonio Kröger, who keeps repeating „The stars, God, take a look at the stars”.

And like Serenus Zeitblom in *Doctor Faustus*, I also had my doubts about this speech „whether according to my existence I am the right man” for this task, „to which I am attracted perhaps more by my heart than by any sort of essential (and here I add: or spiritual) affinity”.

I cannot speculate on “the elements” and I will die without understanding anything about fractal geometry, for example. But I can love this music from the bottom of my heart, which resounds in *Atmosphères* as if it were a part of me, which shakes me so in *Dies Irae*, and which lifts me high in the *Violin Concerto*.

There are still so many things left to say – our youth was so rich – our paths crossed so often – I’m grateful to him for so many things that I wouldn’t have learned without him - Weöres, Kafka, Webern, Stockhausen, Frescobaldi, Boulez, Csontváry, Beckett, Bosch, Joyce in *Finnegan’s Wake*, Helms, Nancarrow, Musil, Klee, Nono from *Canto sospeso*, Robert Walser, Lewis Carroll, he even described Alain Fournier’s *Le Grand Meaulnes* so beautifully in Paris that I was disappointed when I read it.

I’ll leave the rest for his eightieth birthday.

My first intention was to begin this speech with a fragment, which later I decided to place at the end – but I couldn’t finish it. So I will include it here:

What does Ligeti mean to me?

The feeling that there is something higher, more perfect than I could ever imagine, that there are connections in art, in the science, in the cosmos, about which he knows-
and here my sentence stops.

Thank you for your patience.

Und
Dir
wünsche ich
sehr glückliche
Abenteuer
jenseits des Spiegels
im
Land
der
wilden
und
zahmen
Mikrotonen.¹¹

¹¹ And / to you / I wish / very happy / adventures / through the looking glass / in / the land / of wild / and / tame / microtones.

Coda Post Festam

... from the end of the *Purgatorio*:

(Dante: a birthday present from Vera and György Ligeti when I turned thirty)

S'io avessi, lettor, più lungo spazio
Da scrivere, io pur cantere' in parte
La dolce ber che mai non m'avria sazio.

Ma perchè piene son tutte le carte

Ordite a questa Cantica seconda,
Non mi lascia più ir lo fren dell'arte.¹²

Yes, if I were to show this text-composition to Ligeti, he would have several things to say ...

- The introduction is too cumbersome ...
- Your coda is endless – a coda of the coda of the coda ...
- The reference to parts of the hall soon loses its function – it's true that you drop it after a while, but as a structural element it tends to dither ...
- Why did you evoke these scenes in detail, and then just cram other much more important ones in the coda?

etc. ... etc.

(György Kurtág)

¹² If, Reader, I possessed a longer space / For writing it, I yet would sing in part / Of the sweet draught that ne'er would satiate me. But inasmuch as full are all the leaves / Made ready for this second canticle, / The curb of art no farther lets me go (Translation into English by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow) 443)