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*Ingrid Pustijanac, György
Ligeti. Il maestro dello
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Ingrid Pustijanac

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Stefano Lombardi Vallauri

In the full-page cover image, the face of György Ligeti, portrayed by photographer Fritz Kempe at an age in which the salient qualities of one's personality have been carved into the flesh, looks straight at the reader in a way that leaves no escape. His expression is stern; his singular traits, instead, are brilliant. Probably Ligeti is the composer of his generation – the one active in the second half of the 20th century – most loved by other composers and the public alike. But in Italy the last (and first) comprehensive monograph regarding this cardinal composer consisted in the collection of studies edited by Enzo Restagno, published by EDT in 1985, some thirty years ago. The only other publications are shorter texts devoted to specific aspects or having a non-academic approach (e.g. the long interview with Eckhard Roelcke, translated in 2004).¹ Thus the 2013 volume by Ingrid Pustijanac does not usurp the beautiful and unrepeatable cover portrait, as it aims at giving a complete –both extensive and in-depth– account of “Ligeti”, understood as an integrated whole consisting of music, poetry, thought and personality.

An entire era has passed for musicology over these thirty years: with respect to the Italian publishing scene this makes the new release necessary, urgent even, but unfortunately slightly out of tune (meaning too sharp, not flat!). The analytical approach of many parts addresses this work to musicologists, not to an educated general readership. Italian musicologists today, however, read primarily in English (at least) and deal primarily with specialised articles, rarely studying in its entirety a text which instead, being comprehensive, also contains much information already known to the musicologist or even to the unspe-

¹ György Ligeti, *Lei sogna a colori?*, Padova, Alet, 2004.



cialised; a text which, moreover, being written in Italian, is addressed rather to the cultured reader who lacks easy access to the academic literature. Perhaps the reader most apt to get in tune with this book is an advanced musicology student following a monographic course dedicated to Ligeti, who has or is acquiring the means to follow the analyses, but is also sufficiently unfamiliar with the contemporary repertoire for not having yet to directly address all the most specific studies.

The book is the outcome of the musicological school of Cremona, one of the two or three arenas in which research on contemporary music is practised in Italy, where otherwise this vocation is quite uncommon. For this reason, it adheres to the fifty-year tradition of philology in Cremona, updated with studies of sketches aimed in particular at analysing compositional processes, and ultimately structures. Pustijanac has reworked and expanded her 2004 doctoral dissertation on Ligeti, previously founded on extensive research at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel where Ligeti's archive (autographs, drafts, sketches, letters etc.) is preserved. After all, the central critical thesis of the book, which we will discuss, is consistent with the scientific path of the author, who has always been interested in reflections on the concept of time in contemporary music.

Three parts, of different length, constitute the body of the volume. The first part (80 pages) narrates “the plots of life” in a thorough manner, admirable precisely because it does not consider the biographical facts to be interesting as such (although often they are), but already connects them to the composer's musical poetics. The second part (120 pages) deals with the music, ordering it into four sections according to a mixed chronological-typological criterion: first of all the works of the Hungarian period; then the phase of the so-called “static music”; then the theatrical, the “discontinuous” and the nonsense forms, all significantly grouped; finally the forms based mainly on rhythmic invention. The third part (40 pages) discusses the «intersections between theoretical reflection and compositional practice», given that Ligeti, like many of his colleagues, has always shown a propensity to abstraction –transcending his masterly *métier* as a musician– in a typical sign of the times. The entire treatment relies on an virtually complete scrutiny of the secondary literature, of which it offers a compendium that rivals monographs published in foreign languages

and furthermore offers, especially in the second and third parts, no lack of original contributions.

The thesis underlying the general development of the book, hence the title, is that Ligeti's music as a whole, from his first post-serial maturity until the very end, constitutes itself in line with formal principles according to which, in the subjective experience of the listener, time flows in a non-teleological way, not leaning forward but suspended in blocks, such that it can be assimilated to space (the idea was formulated for the first time by Theodor W. Adorno in *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, with regard to Debussy and Stravinsky). Pustijanac's conclusion, given that similar principles in fact govern much of contemporary music, is in particular that Ligeti was the inventor, along the arc of his career, of multiple, different kinds of "imaginary space". Quotes of the composer attesting this attitude are profuse in the whole volume (the clearest are found at pp. 262-3 and 266-7).

One might make a few remarks as to the method supporting this thesis. Although it is legitimate on the part of a scholar to borrow an interpretative category provided for a given work by the author himself, it must however also be submitted to critique and a systematic explanation that makes it usable as a universal theoretical category, beyond the free – metaphorical, allusive, poetic – register with which an artist is free to express her/his thought. Strictly speaking, the idea of a "spatialization of time" is a metaphor, a comparison; in actual fact, musical time never becomes space. Real musical space does exist, and is nothing but physical space; from it derives the technical category of "spatialization of sound", which has acquired great importance in contemporary music as an intensive compositional management of the physical, spatial dimension of sound (Ligeti himself points out this distinction: see p. 258). Another kind of musical space which does exist is "sound space", i.e. space understood as the sum of the dimensions within which sound can vary (elementary dimensions: pitch, duration, intensity, timbre, and again physical space; or more complex categories: mainly texture); this is not however equivalent to Ligeti's "imaginary space". The latter should be understood as the result, at the level of the listener's experience, of a way in which a composer manages that which is always and still time, and within it the various dimensions of sound and structural categories. Instead of

saying that «the primary dimension of Ligetian music is not time but space» (p. 253) or that the compositional procedures «cancel the primary function of the temporal dimension» (p. 258), a proper phenomenology would translate Ligeti's synaesthetic metaphor into terms that all still concern time, and if anything "sound space". There is a teleological time ("dynamic", Adorno would say), and there is a non-teleological, static time; but the distinction is between two kinds of time, not between time and space. This is not only for terminological reasons, but also because the spatial metaphor does not necessarily work for every listener and correspond (as it certainly corresponds for Ligeti) to a real lived experience; an explanation using categories exclusively regarding the relationship between time and "sound space" would on the contrary be unexceptionable, universal.

Beyond this clarification, Pustijanac's discourse on "imaginary space" is convincing and effectively describes the different phases of Ligeti's composition, adhering to their specificity but also placing them in a unitary perspective, which is one of the major merits of the volume. Pieces as different as *Atmosphères* or *Lontano* on the one hand, the *Second Quartet* and the *Chamber Concerto* on the other, or again the cycle of *Aventures* and finally the *Studies* for piano and the last solo concerts, in their extreme formal variety and poetic and chronological distance can be identified with consecutive phases of the composer's career but also distinct moments in music history. That all of this multiplicity can be seen as a unity from the viewpoint of an "imaginary space" is also a strong argument, as a judgement of aesthetic value, in support of the greatness of the composer.

Another chief merit of this study derives from its tenacious application of a method that is apt once again to establish unity in multiplicity and extension. Faced with such an abundant secondary literature that she could have simply summarized, even so offering fresh food for thought to Italian readers, who do not have a single line about much of Ligeti's production, instead Pustijanac performs first-hand analyses on several compositions, from the Hungarian to the last. Her analyses are successful because they go through the various levels of the musical object, establishing meaningful links between technique, poetics, aesthetics and history. They do not limit themselves (as is often the case, even where sophisticated virtuosity unfolds itself) to

identifying relationships of any kind between sounds, or between the signs on the score, but they pass, always in search of meaning, between the level of the sign and that of sound, and between sound and experience. This is a unique kind of discourse that inflects itself, moment by moment depending on the circumstances, into an analytical or interpretative approach – in short, synthetic. This leads Pustijanac, for example, to displace the analysis of *Atmosphères*, which could naturally and perhaps better be placed in the second part of the book, to the third, in support of her reasoning on the relationships between theory and composition. This is however mostly the method of the second part, which first of all, working on the materials kept in the Basel archive, gives preference to the level – preceding the works themselves – of drafts and sketches. Here we discover the compositional processes at their various stages, and the technical methods developed and adopted by Ligeti in the different phases of his creative arc for determining those special structures that made him a master of contemporary music. Structures are implied ‘upstream’ in his original writing and notational devices, then they explicate themselves, unfolding ‘downstream’ in the various forms of the “poetics of space”; but in reality – and his mastery lies in this – there is no upstream and downstream: notation, structure and poetics, like chicken and egg, co-imply one other.

Whether with the “continuous” micropolyphony of the Sixties, or the unsettling, “theatrical”, discontinuous forms of the middle period, or the final polyrhythms and polimeters and polistrata, from Pustijanac's examination we clearly deduce which are the particular compositional fields that Ligeti delved into with the most obstinacy. At the outermost level: form (macroform); which at an intermediate level is generated by textures, by relationships among textures, while at a lower level texture is generated by facts related to two dimensions that stand out among all others: durations, above all, and timbre. Therefore, the analyses (using for this purpose examples, diagrams, illustrations and pictures that substantially enrich the publication) correctly focus on the complicated procedures devised each time by Ligeti to define the relationships between durations (not only, obviously, as durations are by necessity durations of timbres, of pitches etc.), producing overall an extremely fine typology (such that it can not be summarized

here). Almost always the reasons for the decisions taken in the pre- and micro-compositional moment justify themselves in the actual composition, correctly understood as the stimulation – through the composition of sounds – of specific experiences in the listener. And this justifies, in the end, the author's insistence on the metaphor of the "imaginary space".

At times only one additional step would be desirable to give a perfect completion to this methodological path, one that just philology, and more precisely the literary "criticism of variants", teaches us. When there is an even minimal discrepancy between project and work, between sketch and score, right there, in that hiatus, evidently lurks a choice, an option of the composer's will, all the more significant in that it contravenes his own previous choices. In what is materially represented only by a void, since no trace remains of the entirely mental processes of the composer, right there remains, not positivistically but scientifically indeed, the opportunity to exercise the instrument of hypothesis or conjecture. Ligeti often does not respect the indications that derive from the para-serial automatisms that he himself triggered (see e.g. the analysis of the piano study *Désordre*, pp. 216-7); this is a clue that, for him, automatic procedures play an essential function in the definition of the material, that is however secondary to intuition, which undoubtedly always governs them (this is what Schönberg had already stated about his somewhat vaguely defined "sense of form", or his supposed serial "mistakes"). In general, all of Ligeti's automatic procedures are directed or deviated by a strong will (see e.g. the selection of the "rhythmic patterns" in the writing of *Christe eleison* from *Requiem*, p. 156). But even then, we must think that unmeasurable amounts of intuitive decisions, *not testified by the sketches or the score*, surround – subsuming, as does the unquantifiable but overwhelming "dark matter" with respect to the observable matter of the universe – the areas of choice that are instead testified and observable. Science has well the right to formulate hypotheses on dark matter, too. For example, an area that Pustijanac's investigation leaves dark is the one concerning intervallic preferences: in various circumstances we learn which intervals Ligeti chooses, through which procedures he gets them, but not why. This, like others, is a decision regarding poetics, expression, perhaps founded on intuitive

convictions so firm and central as to never need to be enunciated at any stage of the compositional process. Discussing the concept and function of the chromatic cluster, in particular (see. pp. 132-136; 159-160), Pustijanac establishes, adhering to diagnoses by the composer, a dichotomy of “harmony vs. chromaticism”, according to which in every case the chromatic cluster provokes the obliteration of the harmonic sense of intervals in favour of an exclusively timbral function, while actually saturated chromaticism is (at least also) a kind of harmony, in which the sense of intervals is not neutralized at all, and still acts strongly as such upon consciousness.

Last (and absolutely least), too many editing flaws (tens of errors and defects, but all due to a kind of final haste, not basic negligence) afflict that which in any case presents itself as an important work in contemporary musicology, not least on account of its courage in risking isolation in Italy. But it is to be hoped (and the present author, having recorded everything, makes himself available for the purpose) that a subsequent edition shall give the volume the cleanliness it deserves.