

Sonata for Solo Viola by György Ligeti

Adrian-Mihai HASNA-PREDA¹

Abstract: *The Sonata for viola solo* composed by György Ligeti between 1991 and 1994 is a piece that encompasses the musical knowledge gained by the Hungarian composer in approximately forty years. This piece explores a large amount of technical and sound possibilities on the viola in the six movements that comprises. The movements are: *Hora lungă*, *Loop*, *Facsar*, *Prestissimo con sordino*, *Lamento*, *Chaconne chromatique*. In this article we will present a bit of biographical informations, in the first chapter, and in the second chapter we will explore in depth the piece.

Keywords: *György Ligeti; avangarde music; viola; sonata; twentieth century music;*

Introduction

György Ligeti is one of the leading figures of the twentieth century music that influenced the progress of the musical avangarde like few others did. His compositional style developed in the 1950s and 1960s opened new paths that were never explored before and these were the seeds flourished in the history of the twentieth century music. His great ability of not going into only one direction became itself a direction He didn't want to totally embrace the avangarde and also wasn't willing to write old music, so he created his own way of writing music. Maybe his rather rocambolesque first part of his life inspired and contributed to his capacity of finding new ways of expressing through music. He was born in a Jewish family in Târnăveni, Romania. His artistic pedigree included a grandfather who was a painter and also a great-uncle, Leopold Auer, who was a violonist, friend with Piotr Tchaikowski. He started his serious musical studies in Cluj Conservatory where he remained for two years, but in 1943, due to Horthy's fascist occupation of Transylvania, he was sent into forced labour corps. After a series of escapes, runs and finding out that his family, except his mother, were killed in concentration camps, he resumed his studies in Budapest in 1945. He graduated four years later and eventually got hired at the same university. His music took two different paths. On one hand, he was writting music, especially folklore inspired choral works, in favor of Hungarian communist regime and, on the other hand he was writting more daring musical works, such as *Musica ricercata*. In 1956 he managed to escape from the Iron Curtain, going to Vienna and later to Cologne where he had the chance to learn the music of the European avangarde. While he wasn't necessarily an embracer only of avangarde, his work *Apparitions* became his breakthrough in the Western musical world and marking his peculiar musical style. The piece was premiered at International Society for Contemporary Music Festival in 1960. The very dense micropolyphony of the imitative voices are like a fabric in this groundbreaking work. The micropolyphoy technique involves large strutures that grow, each instrument playing its own musical cell at the different rhythm.

¹ Faculty of Arts, Ovidius University of Constanta, adihasnapreda@yahoo.com.

His development and rise continued with *Poème Symphonique* for one hundred metronomes, where exactly one hundred metronomes set at different speed are filling the acoustical space in a rather absurd performance. One year later after the success of *Apparitions*, he wrote one of his masterpieces, entitled *Atmosphères*, created using the same micropolyphonic technique. The beginning of the work brings a chord made out of fifty-nine notes which are performed in more than five and a half octaves. Couple of the big importance large works followed up. One is *Requiem* for two soloists, double chorus and orchestra. This is a very impactful work, where superimposed voices create an extremely dark mood using the micropolyphony. Also *Lux aeterna* for sixteen solo voices, and *Lontano* for orchestra, are part of this exhibition in high skilled large scale works.

These great achievements by Ligeti reached to the American film director Stanley Kubrick. „In early 1968, a few months after *Lontano*’s premiere, an American friend wrote to Ligeti with the news that the film director Stanley Kubrick had released a science-fiction epic titled „2001: A Space Odyssey”, in which no fewer than four Ligeti scores— *Requiem*, *Lux aeterna*, *Atmosphères*, and *Aventures*—were heard. Although the director had not asked permission, and paid a fee only after a protracted legal squabble, Ligeti expressed admiration for Kubrick’s achievement. The *Requiem* accompanies the various apparitions of an inscrutable black monolith, which represents the invasion of a superior alien intelligence. When the astronaut played by Keir Dullea undertakes his final journey into the beyond, Ligeti’s micropolyphony merges hypnotically with Kubrick’s abstract light patterns and negative-exposure images of natural landscapes”².

After these great pieces in exploring the sound masses, Ligeti switched to more melodic oriented, to more coherent rhythmical gestures and a return to harmonic progression. One of the works where he emphasizes this direction is the anti-antiopera *Le Grand macabre* from 1977. This parody uses tiny quotes from Beethoven, Offenbach and short references to Rameau, Schubert or Stravinsky. An intended tribute to Brahms was his *Horn Trio* written in 1982, and a proof of varied preoccupations in his stylistic. Some other influences were the rhythmic and metric complexities of Conlon Nancarrow, Central-African music, fractal geometry and minimalism. His Piano Concerto composed between 1985 and 1988 is yet another work where he is using a variety of techniques. A melange of polymetrics, hemiola patterns, extremes of register and overlayed modal scales. His three books of etudes for piano composed between 1985 and 2001 evoke the piano complexity from the technical and polyrhythmic point of view and also portray the expressivity that recalls Debussy’s Preludes.

1. Sonata for solo viola

The idea of writing a sonata for viola came to his mind in 1990 while working for the violin concerto. He attended to a concert in Cologne where he heard one of the promising violist of those times, Tabea Zimmermann. The way she exploited the low register of the instrument, combined with the affection Ligeti had for Schubert’s last string quartet and Schumann’s piano quintet³, rose the idea of writing a piece for the viola. The viola sonata has six movements: *Hora lungă*, *Loop*, *Facsar*, *Prestissimo con sordino*, *Lamento*, *Chaccone chromatique*. He first wrote

² Alex Ross. 2007. *The Rest Is Noise*. London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 353.

³ Richard Steinitz. 2013. *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 655.

what is now the second movement of the sonata, *Loop* as a birthday present for Alfred Schlee, the chief director of Universal Edition. Initially, this movement was intended to be a single movement piece. One of his mentors and his composition teacher in Bonn, Sándor Veress, had the third movement dedicated, called *Facsar*. This was composed in 1993. The complete sonata, consisting of six movements, was performed at Güthersloh Festival in 1994 by Tabea Zimmermann.

This sonata is tributary to Ligeti's way of feeling and understanding the Romanian and Hungarian folk music. Chronologically speaking, this is the second important solo string instrumental piece written by Ligeti since his early career's Cello Sonata. Also, it is probably one of the most detailed melodic driven work by any of the composers of this generation. Besides that, it is also a reference to baroque music, through the sixth movement named *Chaconne chromatique*. Just like in his Violin Concerto, György Ligeti pays tribute to his predecessors, but also blending it with folk music spices. Unlike Cello Sonata's more classical oriented two-movement structure, the six parts and their variety also, lean towards a baroque like organization of the material. Complementary, „the final “Lamento” and “Chaconne,” like the independent harpsichord works from 1978, repeat the Frescobaldian pairing of passacaglia and chaconne. This notion of balanced pairs—contrasting versions of an identifiable topic—can be extended to mood, style, and technique, and marks the sonata as a set of six etudes that complement those written for piano”⁴. It is also worth mentioning that this sonata is one of the last works where Ligeti does a synthesis, combining elements of all his periods of musical writing.

2.1. Hora lungă

The only movement that is eminently melodic, is the first movement, *hora lungă* or long song, which feels like a song stretched through variation and improvisation on the basic musical motif. It is played completely on the fourth string and it has a plethora of microtones. In fact, the low C string of the viola plays the role of a compass in the entire sonata, the sound where an idea, a motif or even a gesture starts or where it ends. The beginning of it explores the richness, the sobriety and the melancholy of the lower register of the string. As this first movements evolves, the composers pushes the range of the lowest string. By the end of the movement, the melody is played in the higher, thin sound register, using the artificial barely hearing harmonics. Speaking of the melody, Ligeti is structuring this beginning on a lydian scale based motif. The character of this part is very similar to that of the rubato folk music song called *doină*. The pensative mood of the folk genre is adapted for the lower register of the viola.

The tempo also indicates the fact that the composer's intentions are to spark the idea of a folklore like mood, not necessarily to quote. Ligeti creates some sort of resemblance between *hora lungă* and *cante jondo*, a folk form from the southern part of the Spain. Ad literam, it means a song sang in deep voice. This form includes many repeated notes, much melodic ornamentation, the use of some intervals that do not occur in the standard European scales, and the use of the Phrygian cadence⁵. This appealing to traditional musical cultures is one of the characteristics of this period from Ligeti's music. The use of microtones is an allusion to the Eastern European tuning systems, especially the ones from Romania and Hungary and through

⁴ Amy Bauer. 2011. *Ligeti's Laments: Nostalgia, Exoticism, and the Absolute*. London: Routledge, p. 196.

⁵ Richard Steinitz. 2013. *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 658.

this particular characteristic, Ligeti places his music in relation to Bartók's works. The beginning motif is played six times, but everytime it is followed by a different direction, which in some cases is more evolved or refined. This musical seed plays the role of a F harmonic, below C string, through the interval of perfect fourth that is placed right at the beginning of it and the low C note acts as a third harmonic of the F harmonic. This entire construction around F note and its harmonic series is a reference to spectralist movement.

2.2. Loop

Loop is based on the first three bars and the entire movements is a reprise of these bars in a more dramatic and chaotic way. Each and every repetition uses the same notes, only the rhythmical aspect is varied. In some ways, we can say that the technique used by Ligeti for this second movement could compare with the snowball aggregation, where everything gets bigger and bigger. Also, in a more musical analogy, we could say that this is short sample of skill in writing a theme and variations form. The tempo marking is *molto vivace* and melody is played permanently on double stops. What makes it more problematic is the fact that everytime a new double stop appears, the performer needs to play one of the note on an open string. This animated character encountered here is another characteristic of this period from Ligeti's music, just like in other pieces such as *Sippal, Dobbal, Nádihegedűvel* for Mezzo-Soprano and Four Percussionists. The highly rhythmical characteristic of this movement is linked to his fascination for African rhythms and the barlines have the visual importance and guidance for the performer. Another source of inspiration was Conlon Nancarrow's player piano works with their unrestrained rhythmic frenzy. Likewise, the indication *with swing* gives a bit of a jazzy relation. This was premiered as a single piece by Garth Knox in concert tribute to Albert Schlee.

2.3. Facsar

Facsar was dedicated to Ligeti's former teacher Ferenc Farkas and was premiered in 1993 at Festival Archipel. The word itself comes from Hungarian and it means to fight or to distort, also it is a word that describes the feeling someone has in the nose right before crying. Unlike the previous movement, here the rhythmical part is very foreseeable and rather static. There are some common points with the previous movement in terms of the musical architecture. For instance, it is also a theme and variations. Here, the theme is played on a single string, while the variations bring double, triple and even quadruple stops, making the change in the harmonic area. In the opening bar Ligeti uses the BACH motif, but in a different order (AHCB).

2.4. Prestissimo con sordino

Prestissimo con sordino is dominated by an impetuosity and it goes from the commencement like an electrical engine. Every now and then there's an accent or a double stop that goes into a kind of a dialogue with the *forte* notes and this underlines the stamina spread by this movement. Once again the reference point for this part is the African music, especially the physicality of it and how this creates the idea of continuous motion. The eight notes with accents represent the metrical and rhythmical vibration while the eight note without any accents have a timbral function

2.5. Lamento

„The first four movements, while highly ordered, display ever more freedom: as folk and dance forms culminate in the fury of the Prestissimo. The fifth movement, “Lamento,” is thus a sobering return to the Baroque roots of the sonata, as a pared-down, more refined version of the lament passacaglia”⁶. The fifth movement is a contrivance of two distinct elements. On one hand there is the Baroque slow dance *loure* inspiration. On the other hand there is the melodic progression made in seconds and sevenths which springs from folklore music of North Macedonia, Bulgaria or Ivory Coast. From the architectural point of view, this movement is comparable with Beethoven’s fourth piano concerto, second movement, where the orchestra and the piano have a dialogue in terms of dynamics and also the durations. In this fifth movement of the sonata the dialogue is more subtle. There is a dialogue between the motifs. The first motif, played in *fortissimo possibile con tutta la forza, feroce*, mostly down bow and the second motif in *pianissimo*, *sul tasto*, *flautando* present a very strong contrast that is brought back two more times before bringing a new section which is introduced through harmonics played in double stops. These motifs are linked through a group of rests. The melody is built on a descending contour.

2.6. Chaconne chromatique

Ligeti used the term chaconne in its proper meaning, that of wild and flamboyant dance. The double and quadruple stops have open strings, in most of the cases, these are based on fourth C string, which is, as aforementioned, the bridge point of this piece. The idea of descending is kept by the composer through a register transposition. The addition of elements contribute to the cluttered mess up which lead to a climax, where the execution. Ligeti got to these conclusions through science that he approached in an intuitively way.

3. Conclusion

Sonata for solo viola by György Ligeti is one of the most challenging pieces for solo viola and a work with one of the most peculiar structure and influences in the twentieth century music while not being so well known from either solo instruments repertoire or Ligeti’s catalogue.

4. References

● Books

- Bauer, Amy. 2011. *Ligeti’s Laments: Nostalgia, Exoticism, and the Absolute*. London: Routledge.
- Cook, Nicholas and Pople, Anthony. 2004. *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶ Amy Bauer. 2011. *Ligeti’s Laments: Nostalgia, Exoticism, and the Absolute*. London: Routledge, p. 198.

- Floros, Constantin. 2014. *György Ligeti Beyond Avan-garde and Postmodernism*. Frankfurt am Main: PL Academic Research.
- Ross, Alex. 2007. *The Rest Is Noise*. London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Steinitz, Richard. 2013. *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Whittall, Arnold. 2003. *Exploring Twentieth-Century Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.