

INNER EMIGRATION IN LIGETI GYÖRGY'S *MUSICA RICERCATA*

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SUMMARY. In 1951, behind the Iron Curtain, in a horrible dictatorship when almost everything was forbidden, Ligeti György began to compose *Musica ricercata* for himself, or as he called it, “for the desk”. This inner emigration was a *sine qua non* at this point to find his “voice” and his own compositional language. He began experimenting with simple, elementary sound and rhythmic structures, to build up something new from nothing. First with a single note, then with one single interval, two intervals, until he reached all twelve tones in his own particular way. Several small pieces were created in this manner, mainly for piano, later called *Musica ricercata*.

Keywords: Ligeti György, *Musica ricercata*, Inner emigration

“Would I compose music on a desert island? If the island were comfortable enough and I had sheet music, then I would probably compose, even if I knew that no one would ever hear it... But I would compose differently in complete isolation... The innovative works I composed in the 1950s were completely made for my desk. Probably I would develop in a different way and significantly faster, if they would be interpreted immediately.”² - says Ligeti György in an interview given to Varga Bálint András in 1970, when he visited Budapest as a jury member of an international composition competition.

The idea of emigration, whether in terms of space, time or even thought, was nothing new to Ligeti. In his early years he creates a whole imaginary world, which he called *Kilwiria*. He recalls this memory in an interview conducted by Michel Follin in 1993: „It was an impossible, surrealistic land. The paradise itself, a paradise out of order.”³

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² Varga, Bálint András. *Zenészekkel – zenéről: Beszélgetések világhírű muzsikusokkal* (*Musicians on music: Conversations with world-famous musicians*). MRT Minerva, Budapest, 1972, pp 55-68.

³ Bebeșelea, Gabriel. *Musica Ricercata sau 11 povestiri muzicale surprinzătoare* (*Musica Ricercata or 11 surprising musical stories*). Ed. Humanitas, București, 2024.



He crossed the border illegally in September 1945, to study with his idol, Bartók Béla at the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music in Budapest. When he arrives at the Music Academy all of the flags were flown at half-mast: on 26 September Bartók died in New York after a long period of illness.

Ligeti met another young musician arrived from Transylvania for the same reason, named Kurtág György. The two became friends for a lifetime. Kurtág György, in his *Mementos of a Friendship*, recalls Ligeti György this way: „We met and became friends 62 years ago. In September 1945 we took the entrance exam together for the composition class at the Budapest Music Academy. 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. Until 1956 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 1952.⁴

In the following years Ligeti and Kurtág studied composition with Veress Sándor, later with Farkas Ferenc – both of them emigrated and moved to Budapest from Cluj, Transylvania. After his studies he applies for a scholarship to research folk music in Romania as Bartók and Kodály. During this period, he is deeply influenced by Bartók, Stravinsky and Alban Berg, however his choral works from that period are influenced by the folk-idioms of Kodály Zoltán.

After the appearance of the cultural doctrine in 1946, developed by the Central Committee secretary Andrei Zhdanov, Ligeti could appear on stage only as a composer of folk arrangements. Shortly after Zhdanov's doctrine, it became official pressure to promote and support folk music. The primordial goal of a composer became arranging folk melodies, the only accepted style was the folk style. Shortly after this categorization, Ligeti began to work against the system and to compose for himself. He called his folk-inspired works alibi-compositions, written as a compromise with the regime. At the same time he began to rebuild and create his own art for his "desk" – a radically dissonant and chromatic music – as he called it in his reports.

This inner emigration represents a way out of dictatorship he already experienced in his earlier years: he was refused to study physics due to his Jewish origins and he escaped the Holocaust in a miraculous way (his father and brother, Gábor were murdered in Auschwitz and Mauthausen). All of this made him immune to danger or death, however this tragedy marked him for the rest of his life. "If I hear continuous rhythmic applause at the end of a

⁴ Varga, Bálint András. *György Kurtág. Three interviews and Ligeti homages*. University of Rochester Press, New York, 2009.

concert, it reminds me of terrorism, not at success. Basically, I have a hatred, a gloomy, black aggressiveness in me. Maybe this is a reaction to what I experienced.”⁵

The Hungarian revolution in 1956 burned Budapest again. Thousands of citizens were killed and around 200,000 were compelled to seek political refuge abroad. Ligeti, together with his ex-wife, Vera Spitz, left Hungary. They took a train to Sárvár on 10 December 1956. During the night they walked through a minefield until they observed a small light: the Christmas tree of the first Austrian township. They escaped and got married again in 1957, now for a lifetime.

After his emigration Ligeti composed almost nothing based on folk melodies. This orientation was probably his reaction to the dictatorship left behind, but also a different direction in composing new music, something more personal and unique. On the other hand he never rejected the folk music as a source of inspiration. He cannot deny his origins: even Transylvanian folk music has no direct but surely an indirect influence on his works.

Ligeti's oeuvre, like his personal life, is very complex: "I was born in Transylvania in 1923 as a Romanian citizen. As a child, however, I spoke neither Romanian, nor German. My mother tongue is Hungarian, but I am not a true Hungarian because I am Jewish. However, I do not belong to a Jewish community, so I am an assimilated Jew. But I am not fully assimilated, because I am not baptized. Today, as an adult, I live in Austria and Germany, for a long time I have been an Austrian citizen. But I am not a true Austrian either, just an immigrant, and my German will always have a Hungarian accent.”⁶ – said Ligeti. Some of the musicologists consider this phenomenon a „*Transylvanian attitude*”⁷. Some of them call - even Ligeti himself - a true *Synesthete*: all his senses are blended and melted together, like the interculturalism of Transylvania, to which he belongs. His compositions synaesthetically relate a rich musical vocabulary to literary impressions, visual sensations and psychic states. He had a great interest in culture and arts, literature, architecture, science, mathematics, physics, and fractal geometry. Illusory, imaginary and fantastic play a large role and are reflected in his music. He considered well-tempered tuning worn out, chromaticism used up. He left both tonality and atonality. He found a new way between microtonality and equal temperament, developed a new kind of twelve-tone method, while trying to move away from it.

⁵ Follin, Michel. *György Ligeti documentaire (György Ligeti documentary)*, Artline films, CNC, Communauté de l'Audiovisuel de Belgique, Direction de la Musique et la Danse, Eurimages, FAVI, 1993.

⁶ Schultz, Hans Jürgen. *Mein Judentum (My Jewishness)*. Kreutz-Verlag, Stuttgart&Berlin, 1978. Original text in German

⁷ Stankevičiūtė, Gintarė. *Transylvania Lecures: Kurtág 100*. Cluj-Napoca, 2026.

He considers himself outside any ideologies, opposed to all nationalist movements; however, he feels a strong tie to his native language and culture. He considers his music non-puristic: "My music is not puristic. It is contaminated by incredibly many associations, because I think highly synaesthetically...it is never programmatic music, but is very strongly charged with associations."⁸ He never repeats himself: "To produce something that already exists is of no interest to me... it is not worth making the same experiment again"⁹. Each work may be understood as the solution to yet another technical problem. His music is subject to a slow, constant transformation, an impression of continuity and at the same time a constant innovation.

In 1951, behind the Iron Curtain, in a horrible period, when almost everything was forbidden, Ligeti began to compose *Musica ricercata* for himself, or as he called it, "for the desk". This inner emigration was a *sine qua non* at this point to find himself and his own compositional language. "I began experimenting with simple, elementary sound and rhythmic structures, to build up something new from nothing. I did this in a Cartesian manner, considering invalid all kinds of music I knew or I loved before. I gave myself tasks such as composing something from one single note, its octave transpositions, creating something new from one interval, two intervals, certain rhythmic relationships that could serve as the basic elements of a rhythm-interval formation. Several small pieces were created in this manner, mainly for piano...The title is Italian because – I don't know – sounds better. But it has nothing to do with the ancient form."¹⁰

These eleven miniatures, however, at first sight, look like an ascending path from one tone to twelve, it is much more. Each piece develops from its starting point: from one tone to two, from two to three and so on until the twelfth tone of the final piece. Regarding the use of the tones, Ligeti speaks about an unconscious connection between his concept and serialism: "Certain features of these problems and their solutions have something in common with the principles of serial composition. This is surprising, as I had approached them from totally different premises and a totally different route."¹¹ Some of the pieces use the chromatic scale (IX, X, XI), the others use the diatonic tonal system (I, VI, VII, VIII) and two of the movements use

⁸ Floros, Constantin. *György Ligeti, Beyond Avant-garde and Postmodernism*. Peter Lang GmbH Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, Frankfurt am Main, 2014.

⁹ idem

¹⁰ Varga, Bálint András. *Zenészekkel – zenéről: Beszélgetések világhírű muzikusokkal (Musicians on music: Conversations with world-famous musicians)*. MRT Minerva, Budapest, 1972, pp. 63-64.

¹¹ Kerékfy, Márton. "A 'new music from nothing': György Ligeti's *Musica ricercata*" in *Studia Musicologica* 49/3-4, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 2008, p. 209.

both (II and IV). It is an interesting, but totally different approach to the twelve-tone system. The order of the pieces is premeditated as well. Even though they are individual studies, the manner of using the tones presumes a specific order. "I wrote the pieces one by one and finished each of them for its own sake. Thus, the first two or three pieces were composed in 1951, the last two in 1953 (the last one as an organ piece first), and the remaining middle ones in 1952."¹²

The first piece is not only a rhythmical exercise on one note, but a complex articulation arsenal: there can be found different types of accents, sforzandos, tenutos and staccatos, use of the overtones at the beginning and at the end of the piece by pressing the keys with a silent attack. The art of a composed accelerando, realized by shortening the values, creates a spectacular rhythmic compression. The constant ostinato in the bass - a continuous acoustic background evokes the sound of a metronome: "When I was a small kid, I read a lot because I had plenty of books. My favourite was Krúdy's shorts stories – One of my first readings was about a widow who lived in an old house filled with constantly ticking clocks, barometers and hydrometers. Her husband was a meteorologist. This early literary memory inspired the origins of the *meccanico* style."¹³ - says the composer. He considers that time is clearly divided, yet a static dimension: „One of my compositional intentions is the creation of an illusory musical space, in which what was originally motion and time is presented as something immovable and timeless".¹⁴

After 81 measures of one single *A* tone, a highly emphasized *D* appears with *sfff* on both hands: everything takes on a new perspective, the perspective of an overloaded dominant, resolved to the tonic. László Ferenc considers this paradigm shift a sarcastic gesture, getting rid of the conventional relation between the dominant and the tonic. Even this short piece, where the compositional tools are limited, is full of inventive solutions. The first musical motif contains three tones, the second and the third contain five, the fourth has six, after that the motif comes to life, moving between a distance of one octave, containing six tones in the first half, six in the second half of the motif. Later the motif decreases from six to four, then to three and two. The bars do not represent any hierarchy; they create only a frame within

¹² Idem. Letter from Ligeti to Ove Nordwal, 2 January 1975, p. 210.

¹³ Follin, Michel. *György Ligeti documentaire (György Ligeti documentary)*, Artline films, CNC, Communauté de l'Audiovisuel de Belgique, Direction de la Musique et la Danse, Eurimages, FAVI, 1993.

¹⁴ Floros, Constantin. *György Ligeti, Beyond Avant-garde and Postmodernism*. Peter Lang GmbH Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, Frankfurt am Main, 2014, p. 44.

which the music can move freely. Ligeti speaks several times in his interviews about the difficulties in writing down his works in his early years, this may be a way to obtain metrical freedom.

The second piece seems to be a simple arrangement of a folksong; however, it has no real folk origin. The technique of creating “imaginary folk” extends back to Bartók and Kodály, who used frequently folk-like materials with a „Hungarian intonation”. The melody has 6-6-8-6 syllables in the form of ABA'B. Its tonality (*F-sharp - E-sharp* bichord) is totally atypical for a folksong. The main theme is presented four times in four different orchestrations. Imaginary spatial perspectives, proximity and distance, depth and height, width and narrowness are created by volume, massiveness of the sound, simultaneity of very high and very low notes (evokes the sense of vacuum), octave-doubled notes played in unison in several registers (evokes the illusion of spatial expanse), dynamic degrees (where loud means close, soft means far).¹⁵ Suddenly, *tutta la forza*, the third tone appears, a stentorian G, first in the spotlight, later as an accompaniment under the main motif, but present until the end of the movement.

The third piece is rooted in an earlier composition: Ligeti transcribes the first movement of the Sonatina, composed for four hands in 1950 (finished on 30 December 1950).¹⁶ The reshaped Sonatina movement is in C, however the original was in *B-flat* major. The Sonatina contains all twelve tones, however the third piece of *Musica ricercata* has limited pitch content. The *C - E-flat - G* trichord used from the beginning is completed already in the sixth bar with an *E*, the fourth tone of this movement. This major-minor triad creates a constant tension-release relation, a tonal ambiguity during this movement. The main motif is built on the contrast between the *C-E-flat* and *E-G* minor thirds. The middle section keeps this tendency, using the two thirds simultaneously: the *C-E* ostinato in the lower section accompanies the C minor melody. László Ferenc draws our attention to the tonal relations of the bridge between the middle section and reprise. The three tones *E-flat – E - G* transforms into *D-sharp – E - G* in our perception, to prepare a quasi-tonal solution. This idea comes from the chamber woodwind quintet, transcribed by the composer himself in 1953, entitled *Six Bagatelles*, where the intonation of the wind instruments allows this tonal play.¹⁷

¹⁵ Idem. p. 44.

¹⁶ Kerékfy, Márton. “A ‘new music from nothing’: György Ligeti’s *Musica ricercata*” in *Studia Musicologica* 49/3-4, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 2008, p. 210.

¹⁷ László, Ferenc. *Ligeti a hidon. A Musica ricercata és a Hat bagatell: az exodus zenéi*” (*Ligeti on the Bridge. Musica ricercata and Six Bagatelles: Music of the Exodus*) in *Magyar Zene* 41/4, Budapest, 2003.

Kerékfy considers it highly important the manner in which Ligeti uses timing, silence and musical space. Comparing the Sonatina movement and the third part of the *Musica ricercata*, these aspects are wisely used not only in time but also in registers.¹⁸ The use of great contrasts in dynamics and timbre makes this part even more multidimensional.

The fourth is an unmistakable piano masterpiece, where the world of the waltzes of Frédéric Chopin (*Minute Waltz* op. 64/1) and Igor Stravinsky (*Waltz* from *Three Easy Pieces* for piano four hands) meet each other in a sarcastic way. On the one hand the indication “à l'orgue de Barbarie” refers to the barrel organ or street organ – a primitive way to play music. On the other hand, the two harmonies of the accompaniment alternate independently of the melody. This harmonic discrepancy makes the music even more static. The main $\frac{3}{4}$ beat is interrupted several times with small $\frac{2}{4}$ fragments. This rhythmic instability refreshes the whole concept. The thirds in the middle section and at the end recall Claude Debussy's *Clair de lune*. The diminished tetrachord of *B-flat – A – G – F-sharp* is completed only in the middle section with the fifth note (*G-sharp/A-flat*).

The fifth movement – a strongly expressive lament in Mixolydian mode built on a *minor third-minor second-major second* sequence¹⁹ – recalls the pulse of an ancient Hungarian poem-structure (each line containing 6+6 syllables).²⁰ First only two tones appear (*C-sharp* and *D*), in the second bar already three (*C-sharp*, *D* and *B*), in the fourth bar *G-sharp/A-flat* is added, the sixth bar brings the fifth (*F*) and the eighth bar brings the sixth note (*G*). The whole movement is based on diminished and augmented intervals. The middle section is a two-voiced canon built up first on a dynamic growth, later underlined by an indicated and composed *stretto*. The coda section in the last seven bars repeatedly uses the reverberations of the overtones.

The sixth part is a Hungarian folksong-like piece, a real imaginary folk melody. The six tones are completed with the missing seventh at the climax of the movement - a masterful example of the golden ratio, however, Ligeti refuses every premeditated theory in his music.

¹⁸ Kerékfy, Márton. “A ‘new music from nothing’: György Ligeti's *Musica ricercata*” in *Studia Musicologica* 49/3-4, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 2008, p. 211.

¹⁹ László, Ferenc. *Ligeti a hidon. A Musica ricercata és a Hat bagatell: az exodus zenéi* (Ligeti on the Bridge. *Musica ricercata* and Six Bagatelles: Music of the Exodus) in *Magyar Zene* 41/4, Budapest, 2003, p. 367.

²⁰ Idem. p. 365.

The seventh movement is based on another imaginary folk melody borrowed from the second movement of the Sonatina mentioned before. In the period, when the Sonatina was composed, Ligeti was deeply influenced by the works and idioms of Bartók and Kodály. Ligeti himself declares a Banat-Romanian and Serbian melodic influence.²¹ The original F-mixolydian mode of the movement ends constantly on the 2nd degree. This aspect underlines the South-Slavic influence. The melody appears for the first time as a single voice line, accompanied by a pentatonic ostinato in the bass. The melody appears three more times: the second appearance is doubled, the third is already a two-voiced – the last apparition is a three-voiced polyphony. The melody and the accompaniment have different time indications, they are totally independent of each other. If we take a look at the version composed in 1950, we see a coherent relation between the motif, harmony and rhythm. This connection fades away in the *Musica ricercata*, making this version more authentic, declamatory and free.

The eighth piece is a dance-like melody from the Balkans. László draws our attention to the specific rhythm of 7/8. He convincingly affirms that this is not the “Bulgarian rhythm” named *aksak* by Constantin Brăiloiu, but rather a *syllabic giusto*.²² The *D-C-sharp-B-A-G-sharp* pentachord is accompanied by the imitation of open strings (*E-A-D-G-C*). Ligeti, fascinated by Transylvanian folk music, uses certain harmonic and melodic folk-like materials in the 1950s. He considers simply amazing the way the traditional folk bands use odd dissonances by harmonizing the melody. This kind of harmonization comes from Covăsiu, Arad county, where he spent the last days of the year 1949, listening to an authentic folk ensemble. After the eight notes of this combination (E and A being common tones) the ninth appears only at the last thematic entrance, in the imitation part of the middle voice. The movement is in a constant decomposition: the eight-bar length theme slowly becomes shorter and shorter (6 bars, 5 bars, 4 bars, 3 bars, 2 bars in the final two bars).

The ninth piece is dedicated to Bartók Béla. The imitation of the funeral bells, the precise Lombard rhythm first with sixteenth –, later with thirty-second notes, the subtle descending change of the final chord definitely represents a worthy homage to Bartók. Using minor thirds refers to the Bartókian model scales too. Ligeti in one of his essays affirms that the role of the minor third in Bartók’s music is already a familiar commonplace.²³

²¹ Idem. p. 368.

²² Idem. p. 369.

²³ Kerékfy, Márton. “A ‘new music from nothing’: György Ligeti’s *Musica ricercata*” in *Studia Musicologica* 49/3-4, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 2008, p. 215.

The first seven notes above the C-sharp pedal point appear in minor third steps. The next two come together with the *subito fortissimo* – a cathartic moment of this small miniature. The tenth note appears two bars later, similar to the first ones, as part of a minor third.

The tenth part's theme takes us to an old Hungarian melody (Legyen a Horváth-kertben Budán - *See you in the Horváth-Garden, Buda*) from the operetta *Régi nyár (Old Summer)* written by Békeffi István and Lajtai Lajos. The structure of the stanza follows the model of the new Hungarian folk melodies. The whole piece is built on two different tonalities. This parallel bitonality (D major used by the melody, C-sharp mixolydian by the accompaniment) omits the use of the C tone, thus ensuring the use of only eleven notes instead of twelve. The constant avoidance of the C modifies the accompaniment several times, making this mechanical parallelism more "human". The last two movements of the *Musica ricercata* represent the result of Ligeti's tendency of chromaticism. His new style was built up note by note and the chromatic steps in both movements result from this concept.

The last, eleventh movement, perhaps the most famous of all, finally uses the whole twelve-tone scale. The appearance of the sophisticated form of the baroque fugue, together with the theme borrowed from the *Ricercar cromatico* of Girolamo Frescobaldi (1635), makes this *finale* even more monumental. Little modifications are made by Ligeti, to make it work in his twelve-tone system, but the main subject follows the original tendency to be constructed symmetrically, expanding from a single note to an octave like a fan. The countersubject always moves chromatically descending. Later this masterpiece becomes even more spectacular: Ligeti uses six themes in stretto (bars 36-40), then he brings at the same time the theme with its diminution and augmentation (bars 42-52). From bar 53 Ligeti creates a densely chromatic structure, the theme becomes note by note shorter, until it fades away in the deepest and highest registers.

The high diversity of the pieces makes the whole set a brilliant showcase; however, it is kept together mostly by the main structure and the idea of building up the suite from one tone to twelve. During the whole work we can meet the world of Frescobaldi in a rigorous fugue, the fame of the Hungarian operetta, the homage of Bartók Béla, the wild rhythmic dance of the Balkans, the melancholic melodies of the Romanian Banat, the beauty of the Hungarian folksongs, the tradition of the lamentos and the world of Chopin and Stravinsky in a waltz-burlesque. All of these hints are meant to be contradicted at the right moment, highlighting Ligeti's tendency to be

skeptical and to put aside everything he knew up to that point and start over to create his own musical world. From this perspective the whole *Musica ricercata* captures a brand-new sense. The fugue (no. 11), even if it follows the main principles of the original form, contains several hidden “mistakes” like parallel octaves, shifted thematic entries. The final phrase of the tenth piece begins in D major, ends in D minor – all along the movement is missing the “new”, eleventh note. The seventh piece uses the polyphonic lines freely, however, at the end of each phrase all the lines are catching up. The folk-inspired pieces are arranged with a deep humor, imitating the original performers: we can find incomplete phrases with their characteristic missing first beat in no. 5, inadequate harmonization of an amateur band in no. 6 and no. 8. This critical attitude towards tradition transports Ligeti’s music in a new context, creating new meanings of the tradition in his further works.

The use of each octave range of the piano together with the large contrasts of dynamics and timbre makes not only this piece but Ligeti’s music generally unique. His interest in contrapuntal techniques is even more highlighted with these compositional tools. Even if he still uses conventional metrical patterns, he tries to dissolve the metrical frames. We can meet accents on the weak part of the bars, sudden changes of meters, different density of the notes, different tempo of the melody and accompaniment, ostinatos in different time sections. This makes the *Musica ricercata* an epoch-making masterpiece, where Ligeti breaks with his earlier boundaries and his whole *oeuvre* can be found in its infancy.

Ligeti’s works in general have great success. The quality of his music is so high: its coherence and sonority, imagination, power and its structural logic, charged with associations from many areas.²⁴ *Musica ricercata* is not exempt from this either. The Jenei quintet asks for a transcription, presented on the first modern music festival at Budapest, in the beginning of October 1956. (*Six Bagatelles for wind quintet*) Stanley Kubrick uses in his famous film *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). One thing is clear: Ligeti, through the *Musica ricercata* metamorphoses or “emigrates” the music of the 20th century without any premeditated will.²⁵

²⁴ Floros, Constantin. *György Ligeti, Beyond Avant-garde and Postmodernism*. Peter Lang GmbH Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, Frankfurt am Main, 2014.

²⁵ Bebeșelea, Gabriel. *Musica Ricercata sau 11 povestiri muzicale surprinzătoare (Musica Ricercata or 11 surprising musical stories)*. Ed. Humanitas, București, 2024.

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