

WHERE TWO WORLDS MEET: LIGETI AND ROMANIAN FOLK MUSIC¹

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SUMMARY. It is hard to grasp how a composer acknowledged as a symbol of the 20th century musical avant-garde, re-formed in the laboratory of electronic music in Cologne at the end of the 1950s and always eager to take on fresh stylistical challenges, resorted to folk music as a source of inspiration. If the intersection with Hungarian and extra-european elements has been studied in depth, the connection with his Romanian folk heritage remains unexplored. The study will therefore show that Ligeti's interest in this went far beyond composition, comprising transcriptions of Romanian folk music (during his stay at the Folk Music Institute in Bucharest, in 1949-1950) and also broad theoretical approaches, later published in Budapest. The analytical reading will show that long after Ligeti had repudiated Bartók's influence, he appeared to revisit his predecessor in exploring folk music as source of inspiration. From early pieces, such as the *Romanian Concerto* and *Baladă și Joc*, to *Hora lungă* (from the *Viola Sonata*), *Hamburgisches Konzert*, *Automne à Varsovie* and further on to the „mash up” of folk influences from all over the world which he promoted in his works from the beginning of the 1980s onwards, leit-motifs such as „bucium”, „bocet”, „hora lungă”, „Romanian folk instruments” etc., they all mark constant references in Ligeti's manuscripts stored at the Paul Sacher Fondation in Basel. The study will demonstrate that the composer's music engages in a subtle discourse with his roots, forging an underground connection between Western and Eastern European culture.

Keywords: Ligeti, Romanian Folk Music, composition, Bucharest, Cluj

Acknowledged as a symbol of the avant-garde of the second half of the 20th century and being at the same time hard to confine to a well-delineated stylistic trend, Ligeti remains an open research theme through the richness of nuances that it involves. The repositioning of the composer in relation to Romanian folk music becomes synonymous with the completion of his artistic profile with a facet that was overshadowed by the resounding successes of his works starting from the end of the 50s, once he settled in Vienna.

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It is a fact that the majority of the analytical paths of the knowledgeable musicologists converge toward a certain segment of Ligeti's work (the 60s – 80s stage), and the angles of approach glide tangentially past the subject of the areas where his oeuvre and Romanian folk music meet. An ever-increasing number of titles enrich the musicological spectrum with topics connected with what Ligeti's work and Hungarian or extra-European (especially African) music have in common, while the connection between his art and the Romanian universe remains unexplored.

Consequently, the stage at which the knowledge about this topic finds itself is currently modest, to say the least, and the launch of such a research is more than welcome; the lack of bibliographical landmarks, and the richness of yet unknown information, to be found in the composer's manuscripts kept by the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, Switzerland, strongly supports this demand.

It is necessary to provide more detail on the multiple hypostases of the intersection of Ligeti's work with Romanian folk music: it was not only the composer that approached this ancestral stock, but also the theoretician and the collector of folk music. Thus, the musicological approach opens up in the future three paths for research through the initiation of an exhaustive analysis of each of the above-mentioned facets.

The scientific studies and the folk music transcriptions

If outlining Ligeti's closeness to Romanian folk music were limited to just his compositional activity, the approach would be incomplete and would classify the author's affinity with this heritage as a circumstantial one. The research theme is vigorously outlined through the study of the composer's theoretical initiatives to assess this musical stock, initiatives that materialised in two important studies published in Budapest. They emphasised the importance of the research period Ligeti spent in Bucharest transcribing Romanian folk melodies from the Folklore Institute archive, period that, though relatively short, was, however, decisive for the years to follow. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the rich references Ligeti makes to our music, references found in his late manuscripts kept by the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, in which, more often than not, his sketches bear relevant annotations: "sound of Romanian folk instruments," "bocet" ("lament"), "bucium" "(Romanian alpenhorn," etc.)³.

While in Budapest in the late 40s, Ligeti was commissioned an inconvenient social task: he is asked to compose a cantata in honor of Stalin or Rákosi, with the purpose of righting his artistic "wrongs," seeing as how the author fervently promoted in his work a contrapuntal style, disliked by the system, and associated by the authorities of that period with religious musical

³ The Manuscripts of the Ligeti Collection kept by the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel, Switzerland.

composition.⁴ Seeking a way to get out of this, Ligeti takes advantage of a scholarship that was offered him for the study of folk music. He goes to Romania, where he spends nine months in Bucharest, but also in Cluj, in 1949-1950, transcribing and studying folk music from across the entire Romanian territory, at the Folklore Institute that had been recently founded in the capital city, built as per Decree no. 135 of 5/6 April 1949, under the supervision of Harry Brauner, as a result of the merging of the Phonogram Archive of the Ministry of Cults and Arts (led by George Breazu) with the Folklore Archive of the Romanian Composers' Society (led by Constantin Brăiloiu, another world-renowned name in the field).

The research period in Bucharest does not only offer the author a valid long-term source of inspiration for his own work, but it also makes him decide to write two important articles about Romanian folk music and about the institute that hosted him.

The first study, *Népzene kutatás Romániában/Cercetări asupra muzicii populare din România* (i.e. *Research on Romanian Folk Music*)⁵, is Ligeti's enthusiastic description of the activity of the Bucharest Folklore Institute and of the way it is organized. Here he witnesses an ebullience as far as the copying of music recorded onto phonographic rolls is concerned, the main actors being, according to Ligeti, especially female musicians, some of whom had just graduated from university, while others were still undergraduate students. On this occasion, he provides precise information on the large number of recordings on inventory (at that time, 1500), coming from the most diverse areas of the country, among them laments, carols, ballads, *doinas* (a *doina* is a type of sad yet suave Romanian folk song), dances, etc. In his study, Ligeti makes reference to the fact that within the Institute there operated a school where folk music was taught and where the use of traditional instruments (at that point panpipes, lute, flute, and dulcimer) was being successfully revived. The author mentions in his article important names of Romanian folklorists (Brăiloiu, Ciobanu, Cocişiu), but also ethnic Hungarian performers and researchers from Transylvania (Júlia Szegő, János Jagamos), personalities who played an important role in the promotion of ethnic Hungarian folk music in this part of the country.

In his second study, entitled *Egy aradmegyei román együttes/Un ansamblu popular românesc din comitatul Arad* (i.e. *A Romanian Folk Ensemble from Arad County*)⁶, the composer reaches, by way of analysis, surprising depths in the perception of certain subtleties of singing and harmonisation practiced by

⁴ See: Lobanova, Marina, *György Ligeti: Style, Ideas, Poetics*, Verlag Ernst Kuhn, Berlin 2002, p. 393. The information is taken from the Marina Lobanova's interview of Ligeti in Hamburg, on November 6, 1992.

⁵ In "Új Zenei Szemle," I/3, 1950, Budapest, pp. 18-22.

⁶ György Ligeti - *Egy aradmegyei román együttes/Un ansamblu popular românesc din comitatul Arad* (i.e. *A Romanian Folk Ensemble from Arad County*), in "Kodály Emlékkönyv. Zenetudományi Tanulmányok I", Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1953.

folk instrumental groups of the Romanians of Covăsiuț village. A copy⁷ of the typed original Romanian version of the text (more extended than the Hungarian article he published in Budapest), with Ligeti's handwriting annotations on it, is kept at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel:

Image 1


Armonizarea populară
Exemplificată prin muzica Măuterilor din
comuna Covăsiuț /jud. Arad/

Se spune, că muzica populară românească n-are concepte politoniale, armonizarea. Aceasta însă nu e variabil decât pentru muzica vocală, sau cea cântată dintr'un singur instrument.

Tarafurile sânt armonizate. Sistemul lor de armonizare diferă profund de armonizarea apuseană.


Ceai înțelegem mai bine acest sistem, să analizăm muzica unui țaraț. Prof. Mircea Chiriac a transcris câteva jocuri din Covăsiuț executate de "banda" lui Pătruț Marin. Aceste partituri pot servi foarte bine pentru amănunțita analiză armonizării populare, deoarece conțin muzică în influențată de stilul Măuterilor ortodoxe.

1. Membrii trupei sânt: 3 violoniști /vioara e numită laute sau "hăgege"/, - dintre care un "primas" și doi "contrasi" - și un violoncelist numit "broncaș", /violoncelul = broncaș/.
2. Acordarea instrumentelor se orientează după acordarea primasului. Neavând diapazon, coarda "la" a acestuia variază între:



Astfel acordarea se modifică din zi în zi. Dealtfel coardele vioarelor se acordă, ca obișnuit, în quinte. Coarda "mi" lipsește la contras, și au deci instrumente cu câte trei coarde. /Coarda e numită "fir"/.


Mai interesant e acordarea broncașului. Acest instrument posedă de obicei 4 coarde. Însă după cum spune broncașul, coarda "la" s'a rupt de mult, și el întrebuițească numai trei. Coarda cea mai profundă e numită "ghe", e două "de", iar cea superioară "țe". Acordarea coardelor diferă întrucâtva de aceste numiri. Coarda "ghe" era acordată într'adevăr în jurul lui Sol. Varia între:



potrivit acordării primasului.

Regula era, că această coardă să fie acordată cu un ton sub "la"-ul vioarelor. Acest fapt are - precum vom vedea - consecințe importante în sistemul lor de armonizare.

Acordarea coardelor "de" și "țe" varia în amănunțit de exemplu următoarele acordări: (presupunând că "ghe" = Sol)



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At the end of the published article, Ligeti expresses his thanks to professor Mircea Chiriac, without whose experience in transcribing the writing of Ligeti's study would not have been possible. This proves that young Ligeti won in a very short time the appreciation of certain top personalities of the Romanian musical life of the period, enjoying their unconditional support.

⁷ Ligeti Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel.

Moreover, he makes arrangements of some of the folk songs of Covăsiņ, trying to keep the accompaniment as authentic as possible:

Ex. 1

3 román népi tánc Covăsiņ községből (Arad m.)
(N. B.) A primás vonókezelése nincs bejegyezve.
(Ligeti Gy. és Mircea Chiriac és Ligeti Gy.)

1. Rész *Allergo moderato.*

Violin I (G-D-A) *ritard.*

Violin II (G-D-A) *rit.*

Viola (C-G-B-A) *rit.*

Cello/Bass (C-G-B-A) *rit.*

Ligeti – *Három román népi tánc Covăsiņ községből (Arad m.)*⁸
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The musical universe

In a gesture of “scientific automatism,” Ligeti’s compositional profile was more often than not associated by specialists with works of the 60s, 70s, and 80s (*Appartitions, Atmosphères, Lontano, Requiem, Lux Aeterna, Kammerkonzert,*

⁸ “Three Romanian Folk Dances from Covăsiņ village (Arad county)”. Below the title, Ligeti writes in Hungarian: „A primás vonókezelése nincs bejegyezve. Lejegyezte Mircea Chiriac és Ligeti Gy.” (“The bowings of the 1st violin player are not marked”. Transcribed by Mircea Chiriac and Ligeti Gy.). The document is part of the Ligeti Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel.

Volumina, Études pour piano, the instrumental concertos, Continuum, Le Grand Macabre). His works inspired from Romanian folk music have remained sidelined in the scientific approach, and have been placed on a secondary place in terms of relevance to his work; the reason behind such a classification is based on quantitative criteria, the author contributing relatively few explicit titles to the shaping of a segment of musical works based on this musical stock.

The pieces inspired from Romanian folk music are connected, on the one hand, with the beginnings of his compositional activity, as an alignment, out of admiration, with the Bartókian model; they are connected, at the same time, with his last period of creativity, starting with the end of the 70s, when the author burst the stylistic boundries that he had previously set for himself, embarking upon a search for new elements of language. To Ligeti, the Eastern European and extra-European (especially African) folk music respectively were the new ingredients capable of giving a different lustre to his work from the 80-2000 period. From his early but effective works, situated rather in the area of simple, yet effective instrumental arrangements, all the way to subtle references in his mature pieces, marked in his manuscripts, through timbre suggestions and underground connections with the folk stock of Romanian music, Ligeti proved that tradition and experiment coexist, that the ancestral is compatible with the avant-garde, and, moreover, that they enhance each other.

The first stage includes pieces which explicitly show, through their respective titles, his adherence to the Romanian source of inspiration: *Concert românesc* (i.e. *Romanian Concerto*) or, its simpler variant, *Baladă și joc* (i.e. *Ballad and Dance*):

Ex. 2

Andante

Violine I

Violine II

9

16

Ligeti – *Baladă și Joc* (two violins version)

I

Andantino ♩ = 106

Flauto 1 2

Oboe 1 2

Clarinetto (Sib) 1 2

Fagotto 1 2

Corno (Fa) 1 2 3

Tromba (Do) 1 2

Percussione

Violino I

Violino II

Viola

Violoncello

Contrabbasso

^{*)} The 3rd Horn has an echo function: the player should be seated separately, further away.
 Das 3. Horn hat die Funktion eines Echos: es soll separat und weit entfernt platziert werden.

Ligeti – Concert românesc, 1st Movement

In his writings, György Kurtág becomes a key witness to the direct contact that Ligeti had with Romanian music since his childhood. In his book

Entretiens, textes, dessins,⁹ he leaves the following description: “Ligeti’s knowledge on folk music was not just the result of his readings. Since the age of three, the Hungarian and Romanian folk music that surrounded him was a living truth. Since he was a child, during his vacations in Miercurea-Ciuc, he heard the alpenhorn in the mountains of Transylvania. The particular sound quality (he was also attracted to the size of this instrument, which could measure several meters in length) is derived from the fact that it can only produce natural harmonics. The notes of the instrument sound out of tune to our ears, which are accustomed with the temperate scale, but this does not make them less seductive.” This is where the third part of the *Romanian Concerto* apparently originates from, work in which Ligeti imitates in the orchestra the sounds of the “bucium” (Romanian alpenhorn), by means of the horns”:

Ex. 4

Ligeti – Concert românesc, 3rd Movement

⁹ György Kurtág. *Entretiens, textes, dessins* (Trois entretiens avec Bálint András Varga. Deux hommages à György Ligeti. Autres textes), Genève, Contrechamps Editions, 2009, p. 172 (author’s translation): «Les connaissances de Ligeti en matière de musique populaire n’étaient pas seulement le résultat de ses lectures. Dès l’âge de trois ans, les folklores hongrois et roumain l’entouraient comme une réalité vivante. Tout petit, en vacances à Csikszereda (en roumain Miercurea-Ciuc; en allemand Szeklerburg) il entendit le bucium (cor des Alpes roumain) dans les montagnes transylvaines. Sa sonorité particulière (il était attiré aussi par la taille de l’instrument, pouvant atteindre plusieurs mètres de long) vient du fait qu’il ne peut produire que des harmoniques naturels. Les degrés de l’échelle de l’instrument sonnent faux pour notre oreille habituée à l’échelle tempérée, mais n’en demeurent pas moins très séduisants».

It is still in this chapter that we ought to point out the isolated moments in which Ligeti alludes to Romanian folk music: see the fragment of *giusto syllabic* rhythm from his *String Quartet No. 1* and the corresponding moment in the piece *Musica ricercata* for piano or *Sechs Bagatellen für Bläserquintett*.

Ex. 5

600 *Subito prestissimo* (♩ = ca 86)

605

Ligeti - *String Quartet No. 1*

Ex. 6

Vivace. Energico (♩ = 72)

sempre non legato, tenuto

sempre sim.

ff *f* *ruvido* *sf* *sf* *sf* *sf*

trz corde *sempre sim.*

con ped. (stets wechseln / frequent ped. changes)

Ligeti - *Musica ricercata* / VIII

The period he spent in Darmstadt “reshapes” the composer’s style and distances him from the past; however, his return to Romanian folk music takes place in the 80s, when Ligeti operates an utterly original synthesis between Romanian, Hungarian, and extra-European folk music, in an allusive way. The results may take on pure forms, as for instance in his *Viola Sonata*, where in the first movement Ligeti surprises us with a *Hora lungă* from Maramureș, performed on the C string.

Ex. 7

1. Hora lungă
(1994)

György Ligeti
* 1923

Lento rubato e molto dolente, ♩ = 76

^{*)} $\frac{12}{16}$ sempre sul V - al fine

p molto espr. *mf* *p* *mf* *p*

poco f *p* *mf*

f *p* *mf*

f *più f* *meno f*

più f *p* *pp*

Ligeti – *Viola Sonata*, “*Hora lungă*” (1st Movement)

His contact with this source of inspiration may also receive evocation aspects, as in the *Hamburgisches Konzert*, where the author resumes the sounds of the “bucium” (Romanian alpenhorn) promoted in the third part of the Romanian Concerto, or take latent forms. I refer here to the covert revisits

Ex. 8

II Signale, Tanz, Choral

D **Vivace** (♩ = 138)

Corno solo naturale (Fa) *ff* *rigoroso* *ff* *ppp sub.* *ff*

Corno naturale 1 (Fa) *p* *leggero*

Corno naturale 2 (Mi) *p* *con sord.*

Corno solo naturale (Fa) *dim.* *ppp* *p*

Cr. nat. 1 (Fa) *fff* *fff*

Cr. nat. 2 (Mi) *senza sord.* *p* *fff* *fff*

Cr. nat. 3 (Mi♭) *p* *fff* *fff*

Cr. nat. 4 (Re) *p* *sub. fff* *fff*

Ligeti – Hamburgisches Konzert, 2nd Movement

to the “bocet” (*Lament*), a genre that achieves a symbolic-idea and musical common denominator between pieces like *Trio for Violin, Horn, and Piano*, his Study for piano *Autumn à Varsovie*, or his *Viola Sonata*, in the shape of a descending chromatic bass, specific to the *Lamento*.

Ex. 9

pp

mp

Ligeti – Automne à Varsovie

Ex. 10

Ligeti – Viola Sonata, “Lamento”

However, the most generous case for the researchers is represented by those valiant “textures” of folkloric influences, which impose themselves as a mash-up of great sound impact, and where Ligeti casually mixes intonations of some of the most diverse folk cultures, recreating, as he put it, a global, imaginary folk music. At this point I would like to bring into discussion the case of the opera *Le Grand Macabre*, in which the main character Nekrotzar makes his entry on stage accompanied by four masked devils (reminiscences of the winter Romanian folk traditions in Transylvania?): one performing a rag-time à la Scott Joplin on a violin that’s out of tune; another playing on a clarinet a mixture between a Brazilian samba and a Spanish flamenco; the third presenting a hybrid of a Hungarian melody disguised in Scottish bagpipe sounds; and the fourth, performing on the bassoon a melody intoned in Romania at Easter, which Ligeti sang when he was still a secondary-school student in Cluj¹⁰.

A similar case is the *Trio for Violin, Horn, and Piano*, in which Ligeti himself reveals information about the second part, a very fast polyrhythmic dance, considered to have been inspired from “the folk music of certain non-existent peoples, as if Hungary, Romania, and the Balkans were located somewhere between Africa and the Caribbean.”¹¹

Following the thread of the intertwinement between Ligeti’s work and the Romanian folk music stock, from the beginning of the 50s to his creative maturity, first spotting naturalist evocations, then allusions and bold combinations with other stylistic elements, it becomes clear that, for the future, it is necessary to have a more observant quantitative and qualitative assessment of the impact that Romanian music had on Ligeti’s work, with a useful placement of the topic in a broader context, outlining a comparative view from this perspective with the music of Bartók and Kurtág. Beyond the exhaustive inspection of the score page in search of certain unexplored

¹⁰ Lobanova, Marina, *György Ligeti: Style, Ideas, Poetics*, Verlag Ernst Kuhn, Berlin 2002, p. 231.

¹¹ *Komponistenportrait György Ligeti, Berlin. Kulturstadt Europas (Berlin Festwochen 88)*, p. 38.

“synapses” between the music of this fascinating composer of the 20th century and our music, the context needs to be broadened, by emphasizing certain essential points where Ligeti’s work converges with the values of Romanian culture; it is necessary to mention the works of Constantin Brâncuși, the writings of Eugen Ionescu and Ion Luca Caragiale or the mutual admiration in which Ligeti and the composer Ștefan Niculescu engaged in the 90s. They all represent aspects that demonstrate, if added up in a poetic fashion, Ligeti’s profound and constant underground connection with Romania.

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