

GYÖRGY LIGETI'S *SECOND STRING QUARTET*: BIOGRAPHICAL INFLUENCES AND NEW TECHNIQUES

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SUMMARY. Despite György Ligeti's personal denial of the direct influences on his music by the events from his young years, the listener can easily find traces and echoes of traumatizing experiences in many of his compositions. The study attempts to answer the following question: to what extent is Ligeti's music tributary to the composer's unfortunate youth?

The study emphasizes a few critical biographical details, as well as several related musical consequences. After having had quite a happy childhood in his native town of Târnăveni (Transylvania), and relative stable and fruitful teen years in Cluj, Ligeti faced a horrible personal and professional tragedy when The Second World War broke out. Many of his dreams were shattered, and by the end of the conflagration he would lose two members of his family. The circumstances of these occurrences had been horrifying with Ligeti himself surviving the ordeals by pure chance. Many years later, he would testify that during the Nazi occupation "life and death became a matter of relative indifference." After the war, Ligeti had to endure yet another terrifying reality: the early years of communism in Hungary, the soviet oppression, and the humiliating cultural censorship. Memories of all these years would haunt the composer throughout his entire musical career.

In attempting to solve the question, particular interest is taken in Ligeti's *Second String Quartet*. It is a mature composition, a synthesis (although Ligeti disliked the word) of earlier Bartók-Kodály influences, features borrowed from Stravinsky and Berg, micropolyphony from previous works, and the cooled expressionism of late 1960s.

Keywords: Ligeti, quartet, strings, micropolyphony, biographical.

The life of a contemporary composer is always something of a curiosity to those who are willing to look beyond the façade of a musical career. There are few prominent living composers able to stand in the spotlight and not become the subject of thorough biographical investigations. György Ligeti is certainly not one of them. The present study will investigate the origins of a mature composition by this particular composer, and will find clues as to how the work itself relates to the author's background and personality.

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Ligeti had the chance to become an *international* composer even before he aspired to recognition in his own country. In fact, there is a strong and paradoxical relationship between his tumultuous personal life and his path toward professional achievement. A number of creative influences that would play an important role in Ligeti's compositional career are related to the unpredictable years of his past. Strange things he used to dream about in his childhood, the fear and insecurity he felt while being away from home, memories of the people and places he came in contact with, would all help define a unique compositional style. However, experiences of war, death, humiliation, and oppression would have a different impact on his later compositional thinking. In order to clarify the evolution of these relationships, a closer look at some biographical details is necessary.

György Ligeti was born in 1923, in the small Transylvanian town of Târnăveni.² His parents were Hungarians of Jewish descent who settled in a multicultural region of Romania after the First World War. There is evidence that little György was quite unaware of the cultural differences between the ethnic communities in his town. He created his own solitary universe, where fantasy and music became permanent companions.

One has a mixed picture of the young György Ligeti. On the one hand, there is a small boy playing with the local rabbi's children, and even with those of the local Romanian aristocracy, who would probably have preferred their offspring not to be playing with Jews, but at least were relieved that they were not playing with 'pure' Hungarians. On the other hand, there is evidence of the precocious development that is often characteristic of the subsequent 'loner'.³

There are also accounts of occurrences that left the young boy with morbid impressions he would recall many years later. Biographers would also try to explain their nature and importance with regard to the compositional influence.

There are also more traumatic memories.... "When I was three years old, I stayed with my aunt at Csikszereda⁴ for three months.... When she realized that I was afraid of spiders, she made me collect cobwebs with bare hands. It terrified and disgusted me."⁵

Ligeti remained an arachnophobe for the rest of his life, a fear that he acquired in his boyhood. Life in Târnăveni did not offer him many surprises or notable daily events, so his vivid childish imagination tried to fill in the space that the exterior world left empty. Sometimes this meant realizing fear, and funnelling it into his introverted personality.

² Hungarian: Dicsőszentmarton.

³ Toop, Richard, *György Ligeti* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), 11.

⁴ Romanian: Miercurea Ciuc, a bilingual town in Eastern Transylvania.

⁵ Toop, *György Ligeti*, 11–12.

Perhaps the most arresting experience of small-town life, though, was the children's funerals, where little white coffins would be pulled on small white carts: *"what that meant for me was that death, my own, was in the realm of possible."*⁶

Above all, a sort of premonition of his future as an accomplished musician dominated Ligeti's childhood. Nobody and nothing had access as deep into his sensitivity as music did. Perhaps this is a more widely-spread phenomenon among children of that age, but what makes it striking in this particular case is the composer's ability to remember in detail thoughts he was struggling with at such an early stage in his life. In a conversation with Reinhard Oehlschlägel, Ligeti said,

*I remember that when I was very small, I was always imagining music. It was a sort of ritual when I got up or went to bed.... there was morning music and there was evening music, it was all in my mind.... I think that's how I became a composer. But back then I was unaware that this wasn't something normal.*⁷

Despite all these recollections, Ligeti enjoyed a rather happy and quiet life until the age of six, when his family moved to Cluj,⁸ the cultural centre of Transylvania. There he had the first notable contacts with an active musical life. The local symphony orchestra performed regularly, and for Ligeti the experience of listening to live music was totally new. The young boy also discovered a fascinating world when his parents started taking him to the city's opera. After a few years of hesitation, Ligeti finally made up his mind and decided to become a musician. He had not learned to play the piano until his teenage years, and even then he was far from becoming a virtuoso, but his interest in writing songs and even short pieces of orchestral music led him to apply to the Cluj Conservatory. He was accepted there in 1941, and started reading composition very seriously. At the same time, he enrolled in a science program at the university and began studying physics in an attempt to carry out the plans that his parents had set out for him. In less than a year, the overwhelming workload and lack of proper rest caused him a nervous breakdown, and forced him to quit school. Young Ligeti had no choice but to go to Budapest in search of psychiatric treatment.

This relocation would eventually prove to have at least one positive outcome. Budapest was a major European cultural city, home to the Ferenc Liszt Academy of Music, and to several prominent Hungarian composers and music scholars. Young Ligeti would be given the opportunity of bringing

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ German: Klausenburg; Hungarian: Kolozsvár. Transylvania, along with the city of Cluj, has been part of Romania since 1918, except for the period between 1940 and 1944.

his musical training to a new level there. The Second World War had broken out in Europe a few years before, but as Hungary was not involved directly and immediately in the fight; Ligeti did not pay much attention to the events. It was only his Jewish origin⁹ that caused him problems, and as he was going to find out, the trouble was becoming more and more serious. When the Nazi policy of exterminating Jews spread out into Horthy-governed Hungary, he was arrested and taken to a forced labour camp in Szeged.¹⁰

At that moment, music became outdated. After having had little real sense of the war raging around him for several years, Ligeti suddenly found himself forcefully committed to the Nazi war effort. He first had to carry sacks in army grain silos, and was then transferred to Fortress Grosswardein, inside German territory, where his unit was assigned to transport heavy explosives to the front. This relocation, too, proved to be salutary, as all the other prisoners that had been drafted to forced labour camps were killed by the SS before the war ended. "However dangerous and cruel this life must have been, the service saved Ligeti from the fate of many Jews..."¹¹ Over the course of the conflagration, Ligeti's father was taken to Auschwitz, then to Buchenwald, and finally to Bergen-Belsen where he was killed. György's younger brother, Gábor, was also shot dead by the Gestapo, at the age of seventeen. Ligeti recalls the trauma, and the surrealistic impression these terrifying events had on him:

*We didn't feel it was dangerous – we weren't living in the real world; once our relatives had been dragged off, life and death became a matter of relative indifference. If you died, you died; if you happened to stay alive, you stayed alive.*¹²

In October 1944, as the war was approaching its end, Ligeti took the risk of escaping from imprisonment, hid in the woods for a few days, and was picked up there by the liberating Russian forces. He was detained for a while, but then set free. "He spent the next two weeks walking back to Transylvania, 'as if in a trance'."¹³ At that moment, his life was shattered, but he was finally free. Instead of thinking of the miserable situation, that the war had brought him into, Ligeti was determined to finish his musical training, and realize his dreams of becoming a composer. After all, the suffering and cruelty he had endured could produce positive, creative consequences. Later, he would only look back in an attempt to heal the psychological wounds. Being successful as a musician and delighting himself with the joy of writing music would only partially light up the black corner of his memory.

⁹ "Ligeti himself has said that he became 'Jewish' only through persecution; his real cultural roots were Hungarian." Richard Toop, *György Ligeti*, 10.

¹⁰ An agricultural town in the middle of the Hungarian Plains.

¹¹ Richart, Robert W., *György Ligeti, A Bio-Bibliography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 3–4.

¹² Toop, *György Ligeti*, 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22.

*Ligeti describes the experience of those years as a wound that cannot be healed, and the source of an undying hatred of those (but only those) who were directly responsible.... Until the day he dies, he says, he will harbour fantasies of revenge, however incomprehensible these seem...*¹⁴

In the fall of 1945, Ligeti started new studies at the Budapest Academy of Music, and upon his successful graduation, was offered a teaching position at the same institution. He was composing intensely again, doing research in the field of tonal harmony, and even trying to take over the task of collecting traditional folk songs in Transylvanian villages. Although there were some minor concerns about his health,¹⁵ it seemed that everything in his life was returning to normality. Unfortunately, he would very soon realize that the newly installed Hungarian communist regime was imposing a drastic censorship on culture, especially on modernist and Western cultural influences. As incredible as it may seem, at that time even listening to new music radio broadcasts was illegal and perilous throughout all countries experiencing Soviet occupation. The story of fighting persecution and professional humiliation continued until December of 1956, when Ligeti concluded that too much of his life had been subjected to arbitrary and dangerous political games, so he left Hungary amidst the popular uprising that was taking place there.¹⁶

These are the facts of life that one has to consider while analyzing Ligeti's compositions. Despite his repeated personal denial of his music having been directly influenced by any events from his young life, a contradiction lies before us. Ligeti himself is not very consistent with the accounts of facts and circumstances. Neither is he clear with his opinions regarding external influences on his work. What comes across as evident is the fact that Ligeti would really like to be able to put behind certain representations of his past, while he also finds it very hard to admit that the incapacity of doing so permanently haunts his compositional activity. To answer the dilemma, one has to dig deep into Ligeti's sound universe, as well as capture the tone of his confessions.

*One dimension of my music bears the imprint of a long time spent in the shadow of death both as an individual and as the member of a group. Not that it lends a tragic quality to my music, quite the opposite. Not anyone who has been through horrifying experiences is likely to create terrifying works of art in all seriousness. He is more likely to alienate.*¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., 22.

¹⁵ "During much of this time he was ill with pleurisy, a recurrent condition he had acquired during forced labor." Richart, Robert W., *György Ligeti, A Bio-Bibliography*, 4.

¹⁶ "By this stage, there was little doubt in his mind that he had to leave Budapest, and attempt to flee to the West." (Toop, *György Ligeti*, 46).

¹⁷ [Ligeti, György], *György Ligeti in Conversation with Péter Várnai, Josef Häusler, Claude Samuel and Himself* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1983), 21.

This kind of insight into Ligeti's music is, undoubtedly, priceless. However, readers have to confront more contradictions. If anything, Ligeti's scores suggest a shocking, "livid, hectic, and freakish"¹⁸ soundscape. At least as far as the pieces composed after 1956 are concerned, there is no proof of the opposite. The best one can do about accepting Ligeti's reluctance to acknowledge direct biographical influences is establishing a dichotomy between what is intended to transpire in music, and what is not. The latter category, then, would have to deal with the composer's subconscious impulses. On the other hand, Ligeti is never reluctant to give us hints about the personal experiences that might unconsciously shape his compositional outcome.

*A whole range of experiences find their way into music, all that we assimilate both emotionally, and all the technical skills we acquire are factors that shape a composer's music.*¹⁹

If it became clear that memories of childhood scenes have indeed influenced Ligeti, one could assume that memories of war have done so, too. Yet, the composer oscillates between admitting that the magic universe of his boyhood and the discoveries of those early years were constantly coming back to his mind, and ruling out any connection they might have with the reality of his musical productions. The following statements that György Ligeti made over the course of the same interview ultimately bear proof to his discomfort with such an association. This attitude is characteristic of many artists who need to devise justifications in order to validate their artistic views.

*I do not think that we should overestimate the importance of childhood experiences...*²⁰

*Perhaps it is a form of defence, a way of overcoming fear; the fear of childhood fantasies or the very real fear of death I experienced in Nazi times. But I do not really know whether it goes back to past experiences.*²¹

Scholars and biographers who have come in contact with the composer over the last few decades have their own share of subjectivity when it comes to associating real life experiences with the features of Ligeti's masterpieces. Tracing back the sources that all these views are based upon will lead us to a few interviews conducted with Ligeti, and to some concert program notes written by the author as well. If one is willing to give credit to all of them, then the inevitable conclusion one reaches is that Ligeti himself does not wish to pose as an easy subject for scrutiny. His personal approach to music has changed periodically since the time that he became a well-known member

¹⁸ György Ligeti in *Conversation*, 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

of the European avant-garde. The evolution of his compositional strategies, of the degree of novelty, and of his willingness to resurrect the past in various forms makes him one of the most difficult composers to label. In a conversation with Ulrich Dibelius, Ligeti affirmed, "I always have periods when I latch on to quite different kinds of music and measure myself against that."²²

Whatever appears to be the exception in other composers' cases creates natural rules in Ligeti's. Paradox is part of it, while the elucidation of mysteries (related to biographical influences and inconsistencies) remains of little interest.

*In both the man and his music, there is a mixture of boundless inquisitiveness..., a passion for arguing non-confrontationally with almost any proposition, and a fascination with paradox that seems quintessential to European Jewry's intelligentsia.*²³

By the late 1960s, though, Ligeti's music was starting to embrace a few clear stereotypes. That is not to say he restricted himself to implementing a set of aesthetic principles, but rather adapted a few rational guidelines to his own personal substance. His *Second String Quartet* belongs to this particular period. Music is for Ligeti, in the first instance, something intuitive. Only the second phase of his composition process involves conceptual work. However, in this phase too, the conceptual development must match the initial musical vision. This is one of the reasons that images and sensations from the past can easily creep inside the projection of an emerging composition.

Such a balance between the intuitive and the rational accords with Ligeti's general aesthetic ideas: for him, art is at the same time "*construct, structure and poetry.*"²⁴

*"Illusoriness and paradox are also essential features of Ligeti's poetics."*²⁵ As in his childhood, when he was seeking refuge from things that frightened him, the composer Ligeti always tries to build some sort of space in which he can find relief from terror. However, if the childhood refuge was an imaginary world, the adult's response to the problem is quite different. Ligeti creates a freakish, terrifying musical universe, as if coping with it and coming to terms with fear would actually mean escaping it.

The *Second String Quartet* is representative of this tendency, and a turning point for its author. After having composed extensively for large orchestra, Ligeti recognized he had to master a technique that would make the quartet sound as though far more than four players were involved.

²² Toop, *György Ligeti*, 113.

²³ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁴ Lobanova, Marina, *György Ligeti: Style, Ideas, Poetics* (Berlin: Kuhn, 2002), 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

*I began by experimenting with complex micro polyphonic textures in orchestral works and only later, in the course of the 1960s, did I seek ways of reducing the number of voices. The String Quartet No. 2 was one outcome of this process.*²⁶

He achieved this goal by several different means, such as assigning a sheer number of notes to each part, frantic activity, and great diversity of tone colours. Most notably, Ligeti prefers the amplitude of gestures to the argument itself, and uses colour as a substitute for content and depth. He has stated numerous times that sounds and music evoke sensations of colour, consistency, and tangible form. This Quartet is all about associating sounds with images and material qualities. *"In general, my works abound in images, visual associations, and associations of colours, optical effects and forms."*²⁷

Whenever asked by interviewers which of his compositions he considered the most important, Ligeti named the *Second String Quartet*.²⁸ The strong sentiment of certainty he felt about placing the Quartet in this position made this opus even more appealing to many of his scholars. It is neither the scope (media) nor the popularity of this piece that made Ligeti place it on top of the hierarchy, but rather its capacity for incorporating the essence of his compositional vision. *"It is perhaps my Second Quartet which reflects my ideas most clearly."*²⁹ Biographers and critics outlined the importance of this piece in the context of Ligeti's output, as well. *"The Second String Quartet (1968) is something like Ligeti's summa musica."*³⁰ One of the reasons this composition stands out from the general quartet repertoire is that it maintains a strong bond with the tradition of the genre. However paradoxical it may seem, one can identify allusions to the past throughout the piece, as well as connections to compositional strategies from earlier epochs. These allusions do not materialize in form of strict quotations, nor do they suggest a certain affiliation to a defunct tonal system.³¹ The correspondences come down to rhetoric, and to a combination of Ligeti's desire always to do something new with his need to keep the past in sight, and even pay homage to it. If we take a close look at the Quartet, we easily observe, *"the entire string quartet tradition from Beethoven to Webern is there somewhere."*³² This piece "explores the relationship to tradition, without seeking to be traditional."³³ Ligeti himself has

²⁶ Ligeti, György, *String Quartets and Duets*, Arditti Quartet (New York: Sony Classical, 1997), Compact disc booklet, translated by Stewart Spencer.

²⁷ *György Ligeti in Conversation*, 57.

²⁸ At least as far as interviews given before the 1980s are concerned.

²⁹ *György Ligeti in Conversation*, 13.

³⁰ Lobanova, *György Ligeti: Style, Ideas, Poetics*, 166.

³¹ In this case, the concept "tonal system" should be understood in a broader sense, rather as "sound language" than tonality.

³² Toop, *György Ligeti*, 130.

³³ *Ibid.*, 131.

said on one occasion that in his *Second String Quartet* “there are allusions to earlier string quartets.”³⁴ Many of the allusions are related to compositional particularities that could be traced back to his Hungarian idol, Béla Bartók. As Robert W. Richart concludes, however, “Ligeti’s connection to Bartók is to be understood in terms of gestures rather than musical morphology.”³⁵

The *Second Quartet* also bridges the gap between modernism and tradition by addressing the issue of musical clichés. It is very mannerist in many respects, and its narrative is organized “according to the laws of an absurd logic.”³⁶ The first characteristic that makes this piece a singularity is the formal structure itself. It is a five-movement composition, Ligeti’s first substantial instrumental work to involve more than two movements, with each of the movements being approached with a different view towards texture and economy of material. “The five movements of the work can be compared to five different views of the same object.”³⁷ Each movement concentrates on a different “Ligeti fingerprint,”³⁸ such as the *hectic activity* in the first, the *floating style* in the second, the *meccanico*³⁹ style in the third, the *wildly gesticulating* style in the fourth, and the *tremolo style* in the fifth. These characterizations belong to Ligeti himself, who has reaffirmed the idea on various occasions.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the five movements pursue the same goal in an attempt to unify the whole piece. They take “the same sort of course: a drift from one register to another.”⁴¹

Just as Ligeti’s young life was marked by sudden twists and turns, this work is organized around all sorts of deviations: rhythmic, chromatic, dynamic, deviations from the equal temperament, deviations in terms of instrumentation and balance. All these features make the Quartet a fragmentary, intricate, and scrappy composition, moving back and forth between the impression of chaotic sound quakes, and that of motionless textures. In terms of performance techniques, the piece resembles a succession of tragic ruptures even more. It goes to the limits of the possible, and the anticipated audience’s reaction becomes a very important issue.⁴² It becomes clear that, as far as this work is concerned, configuration plays a more important role than structure. In other words, the very detailed and precise notation, the carefully designed

³⁴ György Ligeti in *Conversation*, 104.

³⁵ Richart, *György Ligeti, A Bio-Bibliography*, 124.

³⁶ Lobanova, *György Ligeti: Style, Ideas, Poetics*, 166.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

³⁸ Toop, *György Ligeti*, 130.

³⁹ Mechanical, with an obsessively repetitive pulsation.

⁴⁰ Toop, *György Ligeti*, 130–1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴² Here is an illustrative comment about the Arditti Quartet performance: “Their demonic fury and other extremes of approach may not be subtle, but they aren’t meant to be.” Richart, Robert W., *György Ligeti, A Bio-Bibliography*, 124.

bundles of polyrhythmic voices, and the extreme effects are meant to generate suggestions, not to create form. As Ligeti has repeatedly stated, suggestions and mental associations should go beyond the limits of the audible. In his opinion, music is more effective when it is able to establish a marriage between the sonic and the visual universe. He probably correlates the visual image to a more global representation of scenes in motion, which would invest his music with a truly cinematographic dimension. *“The experiences of listening and seeing come very close, and such associations are generally felt rather as being of a purely private kind.”*⁴³

The score itself might not be intended to tell a story, but the result of playing it is nevertheless a perceptual combination that engages all senses. Thus, the listener’s imagination is left wandering, while the freedom allowed to it by suggestion completes the picture’s configuration. Caught in the middle of the highly evocative musical scenes and emotions, the four string instruments appear as characters fighting one another. This warlike appearance is reflected both in the “blackened” passages of the score, and on stage, assuming that an accurate performance involves quite some physical workout. The nerve-stretching, extreme narrative of the Quartet keeps the listener “on the edge,” as well. Even the soft, tranquil parts come across like the silence before a storm. Some of the effects employed by the composer could easily compete with achievements in the field of electronic music.⁴⁴ Ligeti proves himself a master of materializing his musical intuition, and of controlling the psychological impact of his final product. In this respect, the *Second String Quartet* resembles a horror movie soundtrack. In support of this idea, there are many examples of passages that sound clearly like squeaky doors, obsessive water drops falling in a pool, railway brake noise, ultrasounds, whistles, bombardment sirens, all kinds of industrial buzzing, human screams and groans, etc.

The most strident musical result is obtained when Ligeti starts combining these shocking effects, in a sum of what could be called “super-polyphony.” It is part of his more general preference for layered textures. *“The superimposition of many musical layers ‘ticking’ at different speeds was to become a central feature of Ligeti’s music in the 1960s, and he traces it back to childhood experience.”*⁴⁵

What can be concluded after considering all these aspects is that, even though the Quartet has the capability of generating visual associations to the point that it seems as if it is based on a screenplay, there is no hard evidence that Ligeti was conforming to a recollection of actual events. Nevertheless, he did not intend to write a string quartet just with the purpose of reviving this traditionally elitist genre, or for the sake of producing a piece of “domestic

⁴³ György Ligeti in *Conversation*, 58.

⁴⁴ With *musique concrète*, more precisely.

⁴⁵ Toop, *György Ligeti*, 11.

music.” The work reflects Ligeti’s artistic personality, his inner fight to come to terms with real life experiences, and his attitude towards the relationship between tradition and modernity. “No doubt, all compositions convey somehow all the experience the composer has accumulated what you could call his attitude to life.”⁴⁶

As Ligeti was working on this composition, he was entering maturity, a point in life where looking back might seem less discouraging than looking forward. At that time, he was also trying to escape the unpleasing position of having to take sides in the confrontation between opposing new music advocates. He concentrated his view of what was happening musically in a very suggestive phrase: “In all art forms, returning means running away.”⁴⁷ He also expressed his artistic vision with a moderate enthusiasm, perhaps as a result of having had so many unfulfilled dreams, and shattered aspirations in his younger years. “We had better refrain from prophecies, for they are subjective, they spring from our desires.”⁴⁸ After all, it was the unrealistic and absurd prophecies that opened the way for both Nazism and communism in Europe. György Ligeti wants to be no part of such messianic visions, for he has been tested personally by their consequences. His music and aesthetic remain very personal in trying to transform the face of expressiveness, to capture and convey it in a “deep-frozen” state.⁴⁹

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⁴⁶ György Ligeti in *Conversation*, 80.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁹ Ligeti uses expressive musical gestures, but refrains himself from over-expressiveness.

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