

## LIGETI'S *STRING QUARTET No.1*; STYLISTIC INCONGRUENCE?

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**SUMMARY.** Compared to Ligeti's *String Quartet no.2*, *Métamorphoses nocturnes* is a piece that has been less explored, although it towers over the author's early creations. Using a sole melodic motif extracted from Bartók's piano piece *Klänge der Nacht*, the Quartet develops a set of syntactic and language characteristics that confer this Budapest period work a reverential gesture to Ligeti's outstanding predecessor. The arch form structure, the continuous variation technique, the fusion between chromaticism and diatonicism, they all highlight a compelling interconnection with Bartók's universe. Our emphasis on the stylistic incongruence concept emerges from the contrast between the five constitutive sections of the arch form and the *coda* segment. Whilst the constant transformation technique of the generative motif in all five sections polarizes titles such as *Musica Ricercata*, *Sechs Bagatellen für Bläserquintett*, the *coda* conceals a stylistic border zone and prefaces an irreversible evolution process towards significant works of the next decade – *Glissandi*, *Apparitions*, *Athmosphères*. It leads directly to the meta-language of sonorous fields and static blocks projected beyond any gravitational space, where musical parameters dissolve in a unique one: the timbre colour. In the *coda* segment, Ligeti operates a complete suspension of the temporal dimension and induces a sonorous entropy. These new elements will trigger in future works the structural collapse and the disintegration of the articulated form, which will become noteworthy *stilemas* of his later creation. The title's declared metamorphosis required a multi-level semantic decoding, but the analysis finally provided all the arguments in order to consider *String Quartet no.1* synonymous with Ligeti's definitive stylistic conversion.

**Keywords:** string, quartet, Ligeti, characteristics, arch, form, structure, variation, chromatics, diatonic.

Between the two string quartets included on the list of Ligeti's works, the second has become the focal point of interest for most of the investigators during the last decades. All of them have experienced, in a real way, the revelation of an outstanding model regarding the updating and upgrading of

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the genre to both aesthetic and stylistic standards of the twentieth century music. Consequently, they have unduly ignored his previous chamber opus, which one could define as the outcome of an exquisite mastery and inspiration. Apart from casting a shadow on this genuinely unchallenged masterpiece, they have systematically failed to discover a subtle connection between the two pieces, projected upon the structural parameter, as well as upon the rhetorical and the technical aspect.

The fifteen years separating the two string quartets allow the restoration of the evolutionary trajectory of Ligeti's creative concept, at its highest image resolution. Moreover, a holistic approach may also spot a certain polarization of other significant works around these two reference points of his chamber music.

Suggestively subtitled *Métamorphoses nocturnes*, String Quartet no.1<sup>1</sup> appears between 1953 and 1954, in an open-boundaries genre map, defined by an accentuated stylistic divergence. It lines up chronologically close to notable pieces such as Shostakovich's String Quartet no.5 (1952), Enescu's String Quartet no.2 (1951-1952) or Crumb's String Quartet no.1 (1954). Within the diverse art context outlined in the second half of the twentieth century, Ligeti's String Quartet no.1 arises from Bartók's musical heritage<sup>2</sup>. Researches specific to this piece also acknowledge subtle echoes of the dodecaphonic techniques<sup>3</sup>, which Ligeti has come across right after moving to Vienna, when he revised this chamber work. *Métamorphoses nocturnes* stands out as an intersection of paradigms, leaving open to the investigator that option of a pluri-angular access.

Points of contact with Bartók's universe are traceable while referring to the form of the piece, articulated in five connected movements, a borrowing that includes the structural pattern of Bartók's String Quartets no.4 and no.5. A second common element of the form is the continuous variation strategy. The arch form employed by Ligeti, just as in Bartók's Quartet no.4, gives another strong argument in demonstrating the filiations between the techniques

<sup>1</sup> In fact, Ligeti's youth works catalogue comprises another three String Quartets preceeding *Métamorphoses nocturnes*; doubtlessly those attempts have led to a qualitative growth and to an important stylistic profiling. See Friedemann Sallis's article *Observations sur le développement technique et stylistique de György Ligeti au début des années 1950*, in "Canadian University Music Review", 16/2, 1996, p.49 and Friedemann Sallis's volume *An introduction to the early works of György Ligeti*, Köln: Studio, 1996, p. 262-291, chapter „Catalogue of György Ligeti's Early Works“ (1938-1956).

<sup>2</sup> In 1968, Ligeti confesses to Josef Häusler during a radio interview broadcast by Südwestfunk Station from Baden-Baden, that *Métamorphoses nocturnes* was written under the direct influence of Bartók's music and Berg's *Lyric Suite*.

<sup>3</sup> See Friedemann Sallis, op.cit., p.53. In Ligeti's First String Quartet (bars 726-729), the musicologist traces a chromatic descent, distributed to the four instruments, as a three-notes melodic cell. In Sallis' opinion, the resulted scale alludes to the dodecaphonic technique.

of the two composers. An important junction zone is further to be identified by bringing into focus other compositional techniques, such as the *ostinato* or the interpolations. In addition to the musical substance itself, all these gestures confirm Ligeti's Bartókian line of descent prior to his leaving Budapest.

Considering the subtitle and the musical content itself, String Quartet no.1 alludes to the idea of a hybrid between serenade and nocturne. Formal shaping with its internal articulation of the musical monolith in five sections<sup>4</sup> and the balanced timbre formula of the string instruments suggests, in a veiled way, the classic serenade. In exchange, the sonority ambience and the name given by the author in the subtitle, both recognize the work as being close to the aesthetic profile of the nocturne. Thus, the investigator is constantly challenged to seek the fine demarcation line between the two categories or to uncover some new ones.

Although the great majority of musicological researches shows as an axiom the correspondences between Bartók's String Quartets<sup>5</sup> and Ligeti's *Métamorphoses nocturnes* (a fact provable and admitted by the composer himself), the real inspiration source lies, explicitly, in another compartment of Bartók's creation: a piano piece intimately related to the substance of the nocturnal music. A look at the fourth piece of the cycle *Im Freien*<sup>6</sup>, called *Klänge der Nacht*, highlights the striking resemblance of the generative motif that opens both pieces. Ligeti cuts up and transfers into his work a germinative melodic cell from the referred to piece of his predecessor. He endows this entity not only with morphological weight, but also, by crossing the discourse from beginning to end, he attributes to this melodic figure a vector property. The two ascendant major seconds, conjoined by a descending minor second, encrypts from the very beginning the constructive conflict between diatonicism and chromaticism that marks the discourse until the end of the musical piece.

### Ex. 1

György Ligeti: *Métamorphoses nocturnes*, bars 7 – 9



<sup>4</sup> The composer's propensity for the five movements form elaboration will be confirmed later on, in his String Quartet no.2, among others, which sums up five independent movements.

<sup>5</sup> For more information consult Pierre Michel – *György Ligeti*, Minerve, Paris, 1995, p.209.

<sup>6</sup> Composed in 1926.

**Ex. 2**

Béla Bartók: *Im Freien* - n<sup>o</sup>4, *Klänge der Nacht*, bars 1 – 2



The accompaniments of the two pieces share one more common feature; Bartók picks a four-note melodic icon in order to delineate the vertical parameter: it comes out as a chromatic profile cluster, which will become the harmonic hallmark of the Quartet.

**Ex. 3**

Béla Bartók: *Im Freien* no.4



Ligeti displays the chromatic element on the horizontal axis, creating a web of ascending melodic lines. The introduction of what we identify as the first movement develops out of a unique semitonal melody intoned by the viola. It then gradually overlaps the cello and the second violin in the texture. The outcome is a harmonic canvas derived from a three-tone mini-cluster, in an unceasingly isorhythmic movement.

**Ex. 4**

*Métamorphoses nocturnes*, bars 1 – 9



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With its stamp of diatonic-chromatic ambiguity, the violin generative motif acts as an origin point of the forthcoming syntactic conversions. By minimal intervallic gesture, the author sets off the *primum movens* which will generate the whole piece. Form shaping is constantly conditioned by the intervallic metamorphosis of the initial cell, used as a primordial element of an internal transformation mechanism. From this point of view, *Métamorphoses nocturnes* structurally belongs to that privileged category which forever invites investigators to unveil the ingeniously guided syntactic device. The structure of the Quartet is rendered in a clear outline, by the following scheme:

**A**

**B**

**C**

**Bv**

**Av**

coda

Allegro grazioso   Adagio, mesto   Prestissimo   Andante tranquillo   Subito prestissimo   senza misura

Similarly, the arch form is strictly conditioned by the continuous progression of the initial motif, within a strategy that evokes the gradual broadening of the scale structure and interval constellations from previous works like *Musica ricercata* and *Sechs Bagatellen für Bläserquintett*. Applying this method systematically to the entire textual surface area of a piece, it produces a generative music, defined by a high cohesion of the narrative syntax.

Section **A** configures the discourse using seconds and, in his central segment, the complementary interval – sevenths, cells that are manoeuvred in both an ascending and a descending order:

**Ex. 5**

*Métamorphoses nocturnes*, bars 7 – 9



Ex. 6

*Métamorphoses nocturnes*, bars 69 – 73 (ascending)



Ex. 7

*Métamorphoses nocturnes*, bars 106 – 110 (descending)



Section **B** moulds the variational unit with contrasting segments. The morpheme of the seconds is replaced by another interval: the third, manipulated in two directions. Ligeti obtains a broad melodic line, an ideal pretext for an inspired dialogue between the instruments:

Ex. 8

*Métamorphoses nocturnes*, bars 210 – 222



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The major third intervenes in the piece prefiguring arpeggios with major sevenths. The scales, deprived of chromatic elements, now play a simple figurative role. In fact, the dissonance is not discarded; the analysis of the vertical parameter demonstrates that the horizontal diatonic purity encounters the accompanying voice's counterpoint, always placed at a semitone interval. This diatonic–chromatic duality proves itself the salient alchemical principle of the entire Quartet:

**Ex. 9**

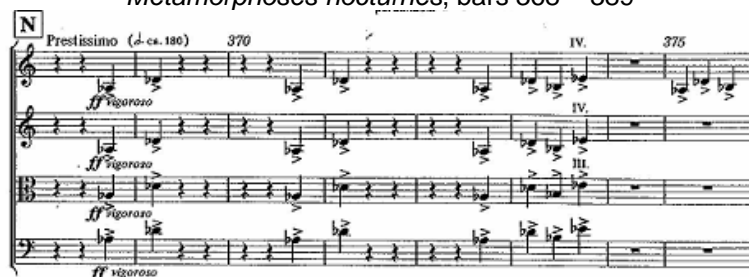
*Métamorphoses nocturnes*, bars 311 – 316



Section **C** represents the axis of the mirror-symmetry structure. Its ludic and dynamic character could easily be likened to a scherzo. Subsequently the first phase of interval dilatation (second converted to third), the constitutive cell of the initial motif expands to the perfect fourth. After several isorhythmic attacks, the newly adopted interval initiates an imitative confrontation of the four voices, as an exception, with no vertical chromatic collision.

**Ex. 10**

*Métamorphoses nocturnes*, bars 368 – 389



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380

*diminuendo poco*

*diminuendo poco*

*ff*

385

*sim.*

*sim.*

*sim.*

trotzig; die erste Note jedes Taktes besonders betonten  
obstinate: the first note of each measure to be stressed

trotzig; die erste Note jedes Taktes besonders betonten  
obstinate: the first note of each measure to be stressed

*Andante tranquillo* – **Bv** is the fourth section of the piece, corresponding to **B**, having again the third cell configuring the melodic parameter.

Ex. 11

*Métamorphoses nocturnes*, bars 539 – 542 (1st violin)

S Andante tranquillo (ca. 126)

con sord.

540

*pp*

*p*

The grouping of the first violin–viola–cello layers the main cell in a fifths mixture, displayed in contrary motion. Horizontally, the main motif surfaces in minor thirds, presenting a vertical fusion of the original hypostasis and its reversed form.

Ex. 12



All the above mentioned characteristics legitimate the analyst identifying *Andante tranquillo* (**Bv**) as the synthesis section of the piece. The intervallic spectrum rounds off gradually, by integrating the sixth cell as melodic and harmonic entity, after having used the progression of seconds, thirds, fourths and fifths.

## Ex. 13

*Métamorphoses nocturnes*, bars 574 – 578

Ex. 13 shows the musical score for bars 574–578 of *Métamorphoses nocturnes*. The score is for a string quartet, with four staves. The tempo is marked 'Tempo di Valse, moderato, con eleganza, un poco capriccioso'. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'pizz.' (pizzicato) and 'arco' (arco). A rehearsal mark 'V' is present at the beginning of the section.

## Ex. 14

*Métamorphoses nocturnes*, bars 588 – 591

Ex. 14 shows the musical score for bars 588–591 of *Métamorphoses nocturnes*. The score is for a string quartet, with four staves. The tempo is marked 'Tempo di Valse, moderato, con eleganza, un poco capriccioso'. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'pizz.' (pizzicato), 'arco' (arco), and 'dim.' (diminuendo). A rehearsal mark 'V' is present at the beginning of the section.

*Subito prestissimo*, the final section, offers the strongest argument regarding Bartók's influence on Ligeti's musical thinking until 1955. It is not only the technique or the language derived from the collision between the diatonicism and chromaticism that proves it, and not only the global sonority or the manner of handling the string instruments that recalls the Bartókian universe. One may state that there is another more pronounced trait detectable: the infiltration of the folkloric suggestion into the substance of the discourse. In the opening of the final section **Av**, it is easy to distinguish the melodic icon of seconds, just as it appeared in the opening of the piece. Nevertheless, the composer resorts to the contrast idea in order to emphasize

the expressive potential, as well as the difference between the two hypostases of the generative syntagm; the strong antagonism between the *dolce* characteristic, in *piano*, of the first section and the *forte* outburst of the same intervallic sequence in **A**<sub>v</sub> becomes obvious. One could notice that the cumulative effect in sonority gets its reflection at the morphological level: we draw attention to the double juxtaposition of the main motif, here inlayed in a typical example of *giusto-syllabic* rhythm:

Ex. 15

*Métamorphoses nocturnes*, bars 600 – 609

600 Subito prestissimo (♩. ca. 86)

\*) ♩ = Die Saite sehr stark auf das Griffbrett aufschlagen lassen. / The string should be struck strongly against the fingerboard.

605

The same melodic nucleus of section **A** settles the discourse; seconds, sevenths and chromatic descending lines, in *ostinato*.

Ex. 16

*Métamorphoses nocturnes*, bars 700 – 710

700

con sord. mit mechanischer Präzision  
with mechanical precision

pp sempre, spicc.

\*) Siehe Anmerkung auf Seite 2  
See footnote on page 2

\*\*) Siehe Anmerkung auf Seite 27  
See footnote on page 27

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Intervals synoptically extracted from the piece's musical substance, allows us to ascertain that it completely comes in tune with the "metamorphosis" concept. It also represents Ligeti's ingenuity in organizing the logos dialectic, by the art of building the whole structure upon a unique melodic motif, constantly submitted to transformations. Hence, one could assert that String Quartet no.1 is nothing but a paradox, where the constant is actually a variable. Using such a technique, the author finds the optimal manner to award a unifying formal order to the whole piece. Each conquered interval that elongates the constitutive cell ambit of the original motif (presented in ascending and descending motion), leads towards the inauguration of a new stage regarding form syntactic configuration. An overview on the unfurling discourse allows consideration on the interval distortion as corresponding to the optical digital effect named by Arlindo Machado as chronotopic anamorphosis.

**Ex. 17**

Motif of seconds:

Ex. 18

Motif of thirds:



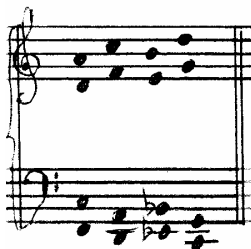
Ex. 19

Motif of fourths:



Ex. 20

Motif of fifths (as vertical element):



Ex. 21

Motif of sixths:



Ex. 22

Motif of sevenths:



The boldest moment is kept for the end, inside the *coda* segment. Here is located the very frontier between the two distinct periods of Ligeti's language and concept evolution. One may interpret this fragment as an eclosion moment, which maps out the separation line between the creative phase tributary to Bartók<sup>7</sup> and the moment of birth of a new aesthetic. It establishes, in fact, an idiomatic "link" towards titles of the following decade, such as *Glissandi*, *Apparitions*, *Atmosphères*. One witnesses an irreversible

<sup>7</sup> The composer describes himself by that time as the „prehistoric Ligeti”.

initiation process that leads directly to the meta-language of the sonorous fields and static blocks projected beyond any gravitational space, where musical parameters will dissolve in a unique one: the timbre colour. As it is kept as a surprise-element, this added segment opens Ligeti's stylistic perspective in a harmonic freeze-frame. It is defined by a definitive suspension of the temporal dimension and by inducing sonorous entropy which, further on, will trigger the structural collapse and the disintegration of the articulated musical form. This new concept was germinating in the composer's mind from the beginning of the 50s, as an alternative to Bartók's traditional writing technique. It is only in his *String Quartet* no.1 and in the *coda* segment especially where the shifting from the territory rooted in past tradition moves to a new conceptual dimension. Metamorphosis, in the deepest sense of the word, condenses in this additional segment: the innovation coefficient is embodied by novel *brouillage* effect (*glissandi* on the harmonics of the four instruments in a high register).

**Ex. 23**

*Métamorphoses nocturnes*, bars 1063 – 1083

The image displays a musical score for four staves, representing a string quartet. The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers bars 1063 to 1070, with a measure number '1065' at the beginning and '1070' at the end. The second system covers bars 1075 to 1080, with measure numbers '1075' and '1080' at the beginning and end respectively. The notation is highly complex, featuring numerous glissandi (indicated by wavy lines) and harmonic structures. The staves are labeled with 'IV.' and 'ppp' (pianissimo) markings. The overall texture is dense and abstract, characteristic of Ligeti's 'Métamorphoses nocturnes'.

On the resultant canvas, the cello brings in the main rhetorical figure, in *rubato* and descending motion, like a melodic invocation beyond any temporal and gravitational dimension. The last recalling of the generative motif stands for a subliminal message: Ligeti's farewell from his first creation period, which seals off in this nocturnal piece the past and sketches the future.

**Ex. 24**

*Métamorphoses nocturnes*, bars 1184 – 1205

1185 1190 *perdendosi* *sim.* *ppp*

Die 1. Violine ironisch nachahmend / imitating ironically the 1-st violin  
*rubato, senza misura \**

*ppp*

\*) Vlc. wie Vln. bei [VV] / Cello as 1st Vln. at [VV]

1195 1200 1205

*dim. poco a poco*

Coda opens a gate towards a new creative identity and assumes the function of an “optical prism”, through which one could discern connections with characteristics of his next creation phase. The “index of refraction” shows that the abolishment of the intervals’ structural role will lead to the new syntax, made up of new morphological elements, such as densities, registers and ambit. Intervalllic progression found along the five constitutive segments of the Quartet will appear later on at the higher level, converted to quantitative progression of the vertical aggregates (*Lux aeterna*), to gradual ambit magnifying (*Continuum*, *Coulée*) or to cluster formations folding and unfolding (*Volumina*, *Cello Concerto – first movement*). Far from being just a “dysfunction” of the piece, the *coda* signals a new calibration of the author’s

reference points, his compositional device upgrading to the newest qualitative coordinates. One can decode the signs of an astonishing phenomenon: the replacement of the outdated conceptual vision and the installation of a new technical-aesthetic program: Ligeti in the limbo between tradition and modernity.

The analytical examination of author's String Quartet no.1, places the investigator under the obligation of seeking the underlying significances of the title. According to the complexity of the piece, the declared metamorphosis requires a multi-level semantic decoding; does it refer to the continuous transformation of the Bartókian motif cut up from *Klänge der Nacht*? Could one detect a deeper connection with Bartók's concept of "metamorphosis" promoted in his *Two Portraits* for orchestra, op.5 or in *Cantata Profana* (the old man's nine sons turned into stags)? Is it related to the permanent intervallic conversion, obtained by the steady dilatation and compression? Does it imply the syntactic metamorphosis<sup>8</sup> given by the evolution and recurrence of the sections **A** – **B** – **C** – **Bv** – **Av** – *coda*, or does it simply indicate, in an explicit way, Ligeti's irrefutable stylistic shift from that moment on? It would be wrong to construe the transformation as synonymous to past "denying"; the substance of this score confirms that Ligetian language operates a creative absorption of the musical tradition, an organic integration of its elements and only then a fine-tuning with the new expressive coordinates. String Quartet no.1 should therefore be classified as a synthesis work of the author's early creation period; it contains, in an embryonic stage, all those elements that will become the stilemas of his later creation. In his future works, even the metamorphosis concept will be perceptible, distilled and essentialized, building subtle bridges between different titles of his mature creation period (*Aventures* – *Nouvelles Aventures*). The new stylistic blend comprises components such as sonorous fields, fragments in disorderly random movement, sounds agglomeration, clock-like effects and the presence of the micro-polyphony.

Although liable to be diagnosed as suffering from the "stylistic incongruence syndrome", String Quartet no.1 heralds the inauguration of a new aesthetic concept, the take-off towards the horizon of the author's new creative identity. It utterly immortalizes a significant transitional moment, but above all, it embodies the very metaphor of Ligeti's definitive metamorphosis.

(Translated into English by Bianca Țiplea Temeș)

<sup>8</sup> The variations of the String Quartet no.1 are named by the author himself "métamorphoses". See **Ligeti, György** – *Gesammelte Schriften herausgegeben von Monika Lichtenfeld*, Band Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, Mainz, 2007, p.162

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